



MISS NANCY STOCKER.



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MISS NANCY STOCKER.

A Novel.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "PERSONAL RECOLLECTION OF PETER STONNOR, ESQ."

"DUCIE DIAMONDS," ETC. ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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MISS NANCY STOCKER.

CHAPTER I.

A PICNIC.

WHILE Mr. Henry Torrance was making the very best of the opportunities that the mending of young Mundy's leg up at the Moss afforded him in becoming intimate at Champfleury, and more especially with Miss Kate Falshawe, Lord Chomleigh was fretting and fuming over his prolonged convalescence.

With a lover's impatience he had disobeyed orders, got up, and used the lame arm in spite of warnings, till he ruefully learned a practical lesson about more haste and less speed. His recovery was measured by weeks instead of days, and many and many a time during that probation had his hungry eyes peeped through the venetian blinds on to the bright springy turf across there at The Laurels. He would furtively watch for Rosie's appearance, and long to be by her side when she took her place in the tennis-court. He could have scored every game, and given a brilliant analysis of Rosie's play. He could have told you the colour of every ribbon she wore. Sometimes he recognised the very dress in which he had first seen her at the Champfleury gates, so deeply was that rosy picture limned in his heart.

What momentous things had happened

since then! Only a few weeks since the two wiseheads had hatched their counter-plot, and complications had already arisen which no one could by any possibility have foreseen.

The particular complication that disturbed his lordship's serenity just now was an invitation he had received from Mrs. Falshawe to a picnic. "A pleasant way of making his acquaintance," she wrote, and Kate and the young people were to arrange it whenever he was well enough to be present.

Now this was altogether such an extraordinary occurrence, something so entirely out of the lady's "use and wont," that he could only suppose his mother's maternal heart had been so touched by his sufferings as to make advances to Mrs. Falshawe. Very kind, but very embarrassing! Who could have dreamed that the harmless

pretence of being smitten with Miss Kate Falshawe could have led to such an uncomfortable crisis?

Why, if the young lady got hold of it she would put him down for one of the biggest snobs out. And Rosie! Suppose *she* got hold of it? He actually turned pale at the thought.

The report must have grown like an unhealthy weed during his sickness, and Mrs. Falshawe must have had a hint from his mother, or why should she have said that the picnic was to wait for him? It should not wait for him! not a day. He had got into a mess and he must get out of it as became a gentleman. There was only one straightforward way, and that was to ask Rosie to be his wife.

He puzzled his honest head what to say and how to say it, but could come to no conclusion save that it should be done, and

done quickly. He had been formally discharged as "cured," so, full of his healthy resolve, he started off, after lunch, brave and erect. Lo, and behold, though, before he was half way across Mr. Camelford's lawn, the unexpected sight of Miss Nimbus under her sunshade, with the green-bound "Idylls of the King" in her hand, sent all his courage flying, and made the brave wooer look as foolish as a big sheep. She, too, was every bit as bad as he, for, if the truth must be written, the poor girl had grieved about Geraint, and her great trouble had been how to hide it. However, as in the simplest of maidens a spice of the serpent's wisdom invariably leavens the harmlessness of the dove, she had succeeded : succeeded with all but Miss Nancy Stocker ; but her sharp eyes had noted the surreptitious study of this same green-bound volume—she had even managed

to get hold of it and tried to read it. In less than three minutes, though, it was thrown across the table in unmitigated disgust at people having patience to read such balderdash "about a parcel of stuffed men and women prancing about the world with lances." The very first line, though, "the brave Geraint," and the well-thumbed pages that followed, had accounted for Charley's nickname. Poor simple Rosie! She had grieved for her Geraint as much as ever Enid grieved for hers, and had thought a deal more of Mr. Pinnock's rat-hunt than all the Arthurian conflicts put together.

No wonder then that her heart went pit-a-pat when he stood so suddenly before her. No wonder, too, that his well-devised speech flew clean out of his head, and that his lips refused to utter anything but the veriest commonplaces about the weather!

It is a pity there is not some well-estab-

lished reference—some properly-constituted authority—that sweethearts could employ in their love affairs, so that their saccharine exhibitions could be avoided, and their mutual happiness arranged on sure and sensible grounds. Unfortunately, lovers suppose that no one could possibly convey half they would wish to say, yet here were two adult creatures absolutely speechless as to what was uppermost in their minds. Rosie, ready to cry with vexation at not being able to express more sympathy with the pale giant before her, and the pale giant himself vociferously declaring that though the glass was going down they would have splendid weather for the picnic, when all the time they ought to have been practical and business-like.

“We must settle this picnic to-day,” said he, venturing to take a seat by her side.

"Are you sure you are well enough to go, Lord Chomleigh?" she asked, softly.

"Strong as a horse," he replied. "Nothing wrong now but the arm. Harry says that will be all right soon. Where is it to be?"

"We can settle that when Kate and the Burgoynes come. Fancy Mrs. Falshawe coming out in this way! It must have been out of compliment to you, Lord Chomleigh."

"To Harry! to Harry! not to me! Not to me I assure you. I should like you to understand this, Miss Rosie. In fact I should like it to be known everywhere."

"Oh, Lord Chomleigh!" cried Miss Rosie, "I hope you don't share Lady Chomleigh's dislike of Mrs. Falshawe; but you can't, or you would not be going to the picnic."

"Dislike! Quite the reverse. What I mean to say is, there is nothing—er—personal about it. Nothing *personal*, you understand."

Then as Rosie's blue eyes expanded to their fullest, he asked confusedly, "Where is it to be? I vote for the Moss."

"So we thought," said she. "We like the lanes up there. Everybody in the county goes to see Mill Lane."

"The very place I never could find!" he observed mendaciously. "You must show me that lane, Miss Rosie. Let me see now—where is it? Suppose this daisy is Champfleury and this one the Moss, your lane would be here?"

"No! no! The turning's here," said she, correcting him with the point of her parasol.

"Ah! I see!" he sighed. "Just past the Champfleury gates, where I first saw you. And how does the lane run?"

"This way," Rosie replies, and so the two baby-boobies went on, pulling off the daisy tops and arranging them with geographical

minuteness till the arrival of Kate with the party from the Burgoynes brought them to their senses.

The only point gained by the love-sick nobleman was the fixing of the picnic. The sooner he was out of this quandary the better, thought he. Little preparation was needed. Cyril had opportunely arrived. Everybody else was at hand. So it was agreed to have it next day.

Not long to wait, but a lugubrious interval for him! He had to bear the unpleasant reflection of having done something in rather questionable form. He had carried the joke beyond the limits of good taste, and when once a notion of this sort gets hold of you it is astounding how a dozen others crowd, push, and elbow their way back to your brain to strengthen it. You suddenly remember how so-and-so shied the subject, and how somebody else put on that exas-

perating "I-know-all-about-it" sort of look when it was mentioned.

Now he remembered it, Harry had not been quite so cordial of late. Kate's name had barely been mentioned between them for the last fortnight. Kate herself, too, was changed beyond all manner of doubt. She was more friendly, but more silent and more subdued. How was he to interpret this? He tried to remember all he had said to her, and felt savage at having to acquit himself to himself.

The morning did not give him much encouragement either; for, though the sun does shine on Flowton more than on any other place, fogs, mists, and clouds occasionally settle on the Champfleury Hills, just to remind the happy Flowtonians that they are not in paradise. There was an ominous bank of clouds over the hills on this especial morning, but Harry the cheer-

ful declared stoutly to his friend, who sat at his breakfast looking as glum as the weather, that Britons never should be slaves, and go they should, wet or dry.

So at midday they started. Lord Chomleigh was made to take his place in the waggonette, but as Rosie was by his side he bore it equably.

At the Champfleury gates a note was handed to them from Kate, saying she would follow. A little disappointing this, but they toiled on up to the Moss, where the rest of the party were seen straggling on towards the big group of firs. The Burgoynes were already there. Cyril Camelford was piloting Miss Vi by the safest paths, and Mr. Pinnock with the old doctor's two younger sons was chasing outlying rabbits with the Kingstoke pup that Lord Chomleigh had presented to him.

At the trysting-place there was a spon-

taneous burst of regret that dear Miss Nancy was not well enough to be with them ; and the Burgoynes—more especially little Effie—looked anxiously for Kate, so that a paper-chase might be arranged through the topmost spinneys.

The day wore on though and still no Kate ; and at last even Harry's cheerful philosophy got a check when the Champ-fleury groom appeared with the baskets of provisions and another note from Kate saying that her mother was not well, and she would join them later.

Lord Chomleigh did not half like this. It looked suspicious, but away with misgivings while Rosie was there ! There was a dullness creeping over them and he did his best to rout it out. He guffawed, but somehow or other his guffaw was not so catching as usual. Cyril gravely propounded a costume picnic for some future time, where

the acting of some story could be kept up all day, and Mr. Pinnock put the pup through his antics; but for all this they were dull, and, either from the oppressive heat of the day, or from a feeling on Mr. Camelford's part that it was best to be civil while Mr. Pinnock held those two mysterious letters, the two enemies did not even enliven the proceedings by a quarrel.

Another hour and still no Kate!

Harry buried himself in the heather, and there smoked and watched for her. Little Effie had to give up all hopes of the paper-chase, and went off botanising with her sisters. Mr. Pinnock and the boys started rabbiting; and presently, when Mr. Camelford began discoursing small tithes with the rector, Rosie and Lord Chomleigh slipped away on a voyage of discovery towards Mill Lane.

He was still weak, but strong enough to

give her a helping hand over the stumpy clumps of heather, but, when they entered the lane and he began to cast about for some fitting prelude to his discourse, he unconsciously increased his pace, and strode along with poor Rosie, like Enid, at full trot by his side, till she declared they must go no further.

Then, as they rested on the bank, he worried his wits for words wherewith to say what his heart was so full of, and to explain how his love had assumed such vast proportions so suddenly.

If he had only consulted that little green-bound volume he might have reminded her of Geraint's exclamation when he first clapped his eyes on Enid—"Here, by God's troth, is the one maid for me!"

But as Charley knew as much about the Idylls as a kitten does about Euclid this happy quotation was lost to him. He was

dumb while she expatiated on the beauties of the lane, with its little water-courses and overhanging banks. Then after a bit she showed him how Kate could catch the small blue butterflies by their folded wings and make them stay on her hand; then his fingers closed over hers, and lo! as the water flowed at the stroke of Moses' rod, so did his words pour out at the touch of her chubby hand. He told her everything; what a worthless lumbering fellow he was, how utterly unworthy of her, but oh! how much he loved her. And he painted his misery so strongly and so pathetically that Rosie's tears came, and he had to dip her handkerchief in the brook and bathe her eyes till the happy blue shone out again.

Then came a more subdued chat, and, after the coveted monosyllable had at last been whispered, he led her out again on to the Moss in the seventh heaven of delight.

Not a word was to be breathed about it at present though; not a word till his mother returned to Kingstoke. They must dissemble. So, to show that nothing particular had occurred, directly they rejoined the party Lord Chomleigh boisterously helped Mr. Pinnoek to boil the kettle with fir-cones, and Rosie clattered out the tea-cups.

Scarcely had the first cup been poured out though when Kate dashed up in their midst. She had come as fast as Bob's legs would carry her. No habit—no gloves—a stalking-cap on the top of her fuzzy head; there she stood, pale and panting.

“My mother!” she said to Harry, as he ran towards her; “go at once! she is very ill.”

CHAPTER II.

MISS FALSHAWE FETCHES THE DOCTOR.

WHILE this pleasant little pastoral was being enacted just outside Champfleury, something very different was going on inside the walls.

The morning post had brought a letter to Mrs. Falshawe which had disturbed her mightily. She wandered from room to room with it clutched in her hand, now and then stopping to spell it over again, but keeping well clear of Kate.

When the time came for them to be starting though, and her mother made no appearance, Kate went up to her room, and there found the poor lady in so pitiable a plight that she at once guessed the letter was none other than Paul Torrance's answer. Her mother sat there clutching it tightly, sighing and shaking her head, but would neither let Kate see it nor tell her one word about it. The girl could not stand this. She had been impatient all the morning, and now her choler boiled over at this non-sensical want of pluck.

"For goodness sake, mother!" she cried, "don't let this letter get the better of you. There is something unpleasant in it, I know. Whatever it is we have to share it, so the sooner it is out the better. Don't shake your head. You *must* tell me or let me read it."

"Kate! I can't!" cried the mother

desparingly, and she looked so utterly miserable and woebegone that Kate instinctively dropped from anger to entreaty.

“Mother dear,” she said, kneeling before her, “I don’t care what it is! Only tell me, and let me take part of the burden!”

“Ah, Katey!” said her mother, suddenly taking the girl’s face in her two hands, “supposing it came to this: supposing you had to leave your home, and to go away never to come back? Supposing we were to become poor, what would you say?”

“I should say it was nothing! nothing! nothing! Nothing, if it puts an end to this wear and worry.”

“Think what a changed life it would be for you, Kate.”

“No need for thought, mother, if it is right. Now let me read the letter.”

“No; you must not ask me that. It would do no good. I was only trying you, my child. Oh yes! I’ll act. Let me rest a little. I can’t go to the Moss; my head is splitting!”

So Kate, a little ashamed of her late impatience, covered her up on the sofa, and bathed her head till sleep came; then, after sending off the baskets of provender and the note, took her place by her mother’s side. Presently she was startled by a curious scream, and on looking round was horrified to see her mother in a fit. She was foaming slightly at the mouth, and but for Kate’s aid would have rolled on the floor.

It passed off quickly, however, and she spoke. There was a little hesitation, but as Kate bent over her she heard the words distinctly enough, and the two words were “Nancy Stocker!”

Kate did not lose her head. She summoned old Janey, sent the carriage off for Aunt Nan, and, knowing exactly where to find the young doctor, galloped off for him at once on Bob's back.

Directly Miss Nancy arrived, Mrs. Falshawe beckoned her to her side, and whispered, "Send Janey away." Then when the door was closed,

"Nancy! Paul Torrance has done this! He has hounded me to death, and I deserve it! Here's his letter. Read it!"

"All right, Marian," said Miss Nancy, "we will see about that presently. Don't excite yourself. Be still for a little."

"Read the letter, Nancy! Read it I say!"

So to quiet her Miss Nancy read :—

"MARIAN FALSHAWE,

"See what comes to one whose 'conscience with injustice is corrupted.' I thought

Harry's son would bring you to your knees. Send me a written confession of all the injuries you have done, and then we will talk about bygones being bygones.

“PAUL TORRANCE.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” said Miss Nancy Stocker, pocketing the letter: “we will talk it over by-and-bye. Rest now.”

“I shall not rest till I have told you something, Nan.”

“Not now, Marian! not now!” she cried.

“Yes! Now this moment! Kate will be here directly! Come here. Bend down your ear—closer still! Nancy! ‘*the wills were changed.*’”

“Hush! hush!” exclaimed the little lady half beside herself; “here’s Kate!” and as she spoke in came the young lady with Harry at her heels.

Mrs. Falshawe calmed herself with an

effort, and after Kate and Aunt Nan had left the room answered all the young doctor's questions quietly, and was soon reassured and comforted by his words. Indeed the little crisis through which she had passed had already cleared her brain, and enabled her to think calmly of the future. She never once took her eyes off Harry's face, and there sat her natural enemy with his hand in hers, consoling and comforting her with that "sort of a manner of his."

It seemed as if the cheerful young fellow held her fate in his hands, and that he had providentially come there not only to help her through this attack but to checkmate old Paul, and spare her the anguish and humiliation of telling Kate her wretched story.

This inspiring notion took so strong a hold of her that she brightened up in his presence, and when he left was able to

return his smile, and press his hand with the very one that had so lately held his uncle's fateful letter.

Miss Nancy waylaid him on the stairs.

"A slight epileptic attack," he said, in answer to her looks. "She'll get quite well."

"This is what did it," she said, showing him the envelope.

"I know the handwriting," said he.

"You would not harm these people, Harry?"

"I am here to see they are *not* harmed," said he, quietly.

"You may not be able to help it."

"I will help it, never fear."

"If any trouble came to Kate it would drive me mad, Harry!"

"Then it is my special business to see that you don't go mad, Aunt Nan! and I'll tell you why."

And here he whispered something in her ear which caused the little lady to jump clean up to his face and give him a kiss hearty enough to sound all down the passage, but the astounding feat was followed by such sudden faintness and pain that she plumped down on the nearest seat and looked up at him with comical dismay.

“So this is the way you obey my orders about resting, is it?” said he, “assaulting a quiet doctor in the passage in this fashion! Upon my word I think I must send you home.”

“I must be with Kate!”

“And you must rest! You must keep quiet, or that heart of yours will get you into trouble.”

“Now, Harry, speak out! Now is the time! Is it going to kill me! Don’t be afraid! Say the word. I’ve pluck!”

“No. I told you before, and I tell you

again, you'll be all right if you keep quiet ; but if you insist on hopping about here, there, and everywhere like a parched pea I won't answer for the consequences. You must not be popping in and out the sick room. If you stay here Jessie ought to come up and look after you."

"All right. Don't frighten Kate, that's all!"

You may be sure he did not frighten Miss Kate! On the contrary, he was able once more to distinguish himself as consoler and comforter by telling her that her mother would not only get over her attack but in all probability be better than she had been for some time. Yes, he knew what had caused it, but they must take good care that nothing of that sort happened again. All she wanted now was a little watching and nursing. In short, the wily doctor played his part so discreetly, encouraged her

so sensibly, and withall was so gentle and considerate, that Kate, like her mother, felt she had brought a tower of strength into the house, and said pleadingly when he had finished his cheerful prognosis—

“ You won’t leave us, Dr. Torrance? ”

Of course he would not leave them! In fact he had been thinking that it would be best for him to stop there that night. So in the evening he drove up again with his portmanteau, and took up his abode at Champfleury, not that night only but for many that followed.

What could be easier than for him to jump on horseback and see old Ford’s patients in the morning, and be back to his little hospital at Champfleury in the afternoon! About as pleasant a day’s work as the young gentleman could desire! An astounding bit of luck it was to be under the same roof with Kate, with an all-engross-

ing topic that necessitated a dozen little confidential exchanges every day! He had to rub his eyes when he woke up of a morning to make sure he was at Champfleury. He could scarcely believe that he had jumped clean inside the fortress, and was there playing the part of friend and counsellor. There he was, though, succeeding admirably too, and if old Paul had only known it he would perhaps have thought that his turn had come for swooping down upon Champfleury with theatrical effect.

But Harry had taken precautions. With cunning simplicity he had written a letter to his uncle, and told him he was in close attendance on Mrs. Falshawe, and with this the old gentleman was abundantly satisfied, putting it down as a proper step towards the righteous end he had in view.

“Our turn is coming!” he wrote portentously in answer.

But to this Harry paid no heed, nor did he trouble himself much about the mischievous letter to Mrs. Falshawe. If he thought of it at all it was with feelings of intense joy and thankfulness for having opened this rare rare chance for gaining the good will of Champfleury.

Fortune favoured him as it seldom favours lovers. Never since the palmy days of Paul and Virginia had two young people such a grand opportunity of becoming acquainted with each other as these two had during those days of Mrs. Falshawe's illness. "Illness" you could scarcely call it. She was really as well (and perhaps better) than ever, but would scarcely let Harry out of her sight.

"Nervous," she said; afraid of another attack, and liked to have him in the way.

"Be civil to him, Kate," she said, "for we really owe him a great deal!"

And Kate was ungracious no longer. She was too large-hearted not to be frank and generous to such a friend. Harry helped her laughingly over the natural constraint she felt in showing him the place; and before the week was out she was escorting him about the grounds with the most charming freedom possible.

In those ever-to-be-remembered days their friendship grew apace, but how it might be affected by that letter of his uncle's she did not care to think. Pretty had the letter must have been to have upset her mother as it had. While it remained unexplained there was an obstacle to anything very confidential with a Torrance, and Miss Kate fretted and grieved over this considerably, because she had already discovered the cheerful Harry was the person of all others in the world that she would choose for confidences. To her the obstacle was insur-

mountable, to him nothing. It embarrassed her, but never embarrassed him. She was always reminding him of it by some covert hint, and if the poor fellow waxed personal she invariably subdued his fervour by a reference to this implied finality.

“It is a pity I’m a Torrance!” he said to her one day.

They had walked across the Park and reached the tiny lake at the upper end (fed by the way by the very brook which had bathed Miss Rosie’s blue eyes). It was a quiet spot—a corner made for lovers far from the world’s turmoil, and the little bit of water was so completely shut in and protected by the big alders, that, though the white clouds scudded overhead and made fairy boats on its surface, every stick and stone and weed was reflected up to their very feet. The park was flecked with passing

shadows, and far-off Champfleury nestled in the rookery.

“It is a pity I’m a Torrance, Miss Kate ! Couldn’t you make me Smith or Brown for the rest of our walk ?”

“What difference could that make, Dr. Torrance ?” she asked, incautiously.

“You’d be more trustful with lucky Smith ; you’d let him help you !”

“Oh, Dr. Torrance ! you have helped us !”

“You have needed very little help yet, but you may need it soon. About this letter now of my uncle’s that has upset your mother so much. There it is burning in Miss Nancy’s pocket. What about it ?”

“I have not seen it. I did not know Aunt Nan had it ! I know nothing !”

“She has it, and I suppose it will have to be tackled. The sooner the better, Now please listen, Miss Kate. You remember what I said to you the other day ! Well, I

propose to begin with this letter. It has come in the very nick of time. Nothing could be better. I can now go up to Dean House and tell my uncle that it has upset the household, and that I want to hear all about it. That will set the ball a rolling nicely."

"You must not do that!" she cried, in dire alarm. "You must not think of speaking a single word to your uncle,"

"Why not?"

"Why not? Well, that is more than I can tell you, Dr. Torrance; but I know you must not think of it. My mother may not wish it. But as to the 'why' I am as much in the dark as ever."

"We will clear it off if it is as dark as Erebus! Dark! Why it is only a shadow like that across the park now! See, it runs away while we look at it. This trouble only wants looking in the face!"

“The worst of it is we can’t look at it!”

“Then let me help you,” he said, warmly. “You have known me long enough, and you say you can trust me. I wonder if you know how much I want you to trust me for all in all—how much I long to serve you? You will be sick of my reminding you of what I said in the Moss Lane, but I can think of nothing else. I tell you I will brighten this place. I’ll sweep away this trouble, and I’ll see you happier. This is the work I have set myself to do, and I’ll do it! Try me, Kate! Prove me! That is all I ask!”

This was quite an unusual sort of speech for Mr. Henry Torrance. He was not given to heroics, and Kate could not help being touched by the earnest ring of his words. Indeed, she was all but swept away by their subdued fervour; but the horrible letter

fluttered before her, so with a little shudder she damped his protestations by saying coldly, "Yes, I know we can trust you, but I don't know whether we ought to."

"That is a conundrum!"

"Well, you are a Torrance," she said bluntly.

"Is that generous?"

"Don't think me ungenerous or ungracious!" she exclaimed; "but you don't know how utterly wretched it is to be in this state of doubt and uncertainty. A mystery is made about everything. One can't speak out; one can't be friendly; we can do nothing. I hate it!"

"Then we will put an end to it. I'll go in now and see Mrs. Falshawe and tell her I am going to Brixton to-morrow to begin business. She will take it all well from her doctor."

"You must not even do that," she said;

“you must do nothing—nothing at all till I have seen Aunt Nan.”

“Then I must speak to you, Kate,” said he, coming nearer and speaking in a lower key. “I must tell you.”

“No! no! no!” she cried, moving off in such quick alarm that she sent the coots flying and splashing across the lake. “Say nothing at all till I have seen Aunt Nan; I will go to her at once.”

And she hurried off towards the house in such evident distress that Harry wisely forbore to press her further.

Miss Nancy saw all this going on with the liveliest satisfaction. It was precisely what she wished. But at times, when she was demurely playing propriety and chuckling to herself at Harry’s cleverness, Mrs. Falshawe’s words, “*The wills were changed!*” came back to her with terrible insistence.

The day of explanation was to come, but Mrs. Falshawe seemed in no hurry for it. The better she grew the less inclined she was to speak about it. In fact she shirked it, and shirked it so palpably that Miss Stocker often had the old adage about the behaviour of a certain dark gentleman in sickness and in health on the tip of her tongue.

Miss Nancy was the wrong sort of person to have this hanging over her; she liked a pin in the right place, she said. She was determined to have it out, chapter and verse, before she left Champfleury, and it came about on the very day of Kate's walk with Harry to the lake. A day of surprises—her first being a visit from Mr. Pinnock. He had called several times to inquire for Mrs. Falshawe. On this occasion, however, he insisted on seeing Miss Stocker, and startled her considerably by popping a packet in her hand the moment she appeared.

“Just those letters, Miss Nancy, and nothing else,” he said, in a shame-faced sort of way. “Please give ’em to Mrs. Falshawe, and say I am sorry. I’m a bit ashamed, too, to tell the truth, but there! you are in trouble here and that’s enough for John Pinnock. No, I won’t sit down, thankee. Burn the letters, Miss Nancy. Burn ’em! There is nothing in them, and that’s a fact. You’re in trouble here, and mind you, if it is about any hanky-panky with old wills just give me a tip—I’ll see you through it. Ha! ha! I’ll trouble Mr. Paul Torrance to prove anything. Anyway, John Pinnock is your friend.” And with a hearty handshake he shuffled off, leaving the little lady utterly dumbfounded.

Before she had recovered herself in came Kate. “What did Mr. Pinnock want?” she asked.

“Called to ask after your mother.” Then

as Kate looked suspiciously at the packet, "Old business letters of your father. The Pinnocks were his lawyers at one time, you know."

"More mysteries, Nan! I want to ask you about that letter that came from Paul Torrance; something must be done about that at once."

"Your mother and I are to talk about that when she is better, Kate."

"She is quite well, Nan, and drifting back to the old groove. Harry and I have just talked it over. He wants to speak to his uncle. It has come to that. I won't let old Paul think we are afraid of him though. I shall go up to Brixton myself to-morrow."

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Kate!"

"What will the mother do? Harry is waiting in the garden to know about it."

"I'll speak to her now! now, at once!"

said the little lady, jumping up ; “ send him away and wait till I come back.”

With these two young people so much on the alert there was no time to lose. Besides, Miss Nancy had thought the matter over, and already made her own private arrangements thereon as will be seen presently.

“ Marian,” she said, going into her room and beginning without any preamble, “ the time has come for you to tell me about those wills.”

Mrs. Falshawe was not unprepared for this attack. For days she had been planning excuses, so at Miss Stocker’s words she sank back in her seat by the window that overlooked the gardens, and replied without hesitation that she did not see much use in discussing it. They could not alter the past. Best to let the wretched business be.

"Kate is going up to Brixton to see Paul Torrance about the wretched business to-morrow," said Miss Stocker; "you may well start; she is going. She is not a girl to say a thing and not mean it."

"She is not to go!" cried the mother, starting up in tremendous alarm. "Do you hear me? She must not go! She would ruin everything. Wait a minute. Is the door closed, Nan? Well, listen; I see a way out of it all. He loves her, I am sure of it. Everything tells me so. It accounts for everything, too. Besides, I have watched them from this window. There they are now going into the conservatory. Look at them! Wouldn't it be a sin to disturb it by any premature action with old Paul Torrance?"

"They are talking about the 'wretched business' at this very moment, Marian. I tell you it can't be shirked."

"Plainly, Nan, I don't see what good can come in opening up this old trouble."

"Plainly, Marian, then, Kate shan't go to Brixton without knowing the wills were changed. I'll be honest, anyway."

She sank down again at this home-thrust. She was in a corner and couldn't get out of it; so after sitting silent for a time she looked up and said, "It is for Katie's sake I have been silent."

"And for her sake you must speak now."

"It is a foolish story," she began after a little more hesitation. "Childish! *The wills were changed*, and we can't alter that. Richard found out they were marked. He persuaded me to take them from under madam's pillow while she slept. Then he altered the notches with a pair of scissors and they were put back again."

"And Paul Torrance suspects?"

"I suppose so," she said, wearily.

“Go on, tell me everything now you have begun. What happened when his brother was stopping with you here?”

“Everybody knows that part of it, Nan. They gambled; Henry Torrance got into debt. The crash came, and Paul took all the letters and I O U’s before he paid.”

“What letters?”

“Oh, letters—I had written.”

“What were they? Love-letters? Out with it. Tell me the whole shameful story.”

Mrs. Falshawe started and flushed angrily. But there is nothing like a chance aspersion for making a person speak out.

“I must tell you all now, Nancy,” she said, with some quiet dignity. “When Henry Torrance came I was in mortal dread that he would find out our secret. It seemed as if he came and stopped doggedly on, on purpose. At last his presence became so unsupportable that I felt if he did not go

I must tell him everything. I could not bear to look at the man we had so injured. Richard was at his wit's end, and as a last resource bade me encourage him; made me write letters; then took the answers and accused Henry of making love to me. Henry was deep in my husband's debt then. Old Paul was appealed to, and you know the rest. You know the whole horrible story now, and you know that Kate must not be allowed to go to Paul Torrance."

It was out at last! The confession was made. A couple of big tears found their way down Miss Nancy's cheek, but she never spoke, never moved. Mrs. Falshawe went on: "You know now, Nan, why I have suffered these years of torturing fright. What am I to do? I have known no peace night or day."

"It is a sorry business," said Aunt Nan. "Do you never think of your old father,

Marian? Do you never pray to God for pluck to do the right thing?"

"Fright has consumed me!"

"Something needs 'sorting,' as your father would have said. Let us collect our thoughts before we begin business."

And with this the little lady opened the big Bible that lay on the table before her, put on her horn spectacles, and deliberately read out the 51st Psalm from beginning to end. "There!" said she, closing the book with a bang, "that did King David good, and it will do us good, and make our work easier. We can't undo the past, as you say, but we can do something for the future. Marian! I have thought all about this; you must make restitution."

"Restitution, Nancy!"

"Bless me! yes! your oblations and your young bullocks, woman! You must give up the place to the rightful owner."

“Impossible !”

“It must and shall be done.”

“But the disgrace, Nancy dear ! Kate !”

“*Kate shall never know. I thought it all out directly you told me about the wills the other day. Listen now to my plan. It is all cut and dried. Kate is never to know. I’ll tell Paul Torrance I changed the wills.*”

“Oh, Nan !”

“Hear me to the end. I’ll tell him I changed the wills, and that since I have told you you are ready to give up Champfleury. I’ll tell him you wrote those letters at your husband’s dictation too. Anyhow, Kate shall never know.”

“You are a good woman, Nancy dear, but ——”

“There are no buts about it. We have to take hold of the nettle now. Kate must not go to Brixton. If she is quiet, Harry will be quiet.”

The impossibility of giving up Champfleury in this summary fashion never for one moment occurred to these two bedazed women.

Miss Nancy wanted the business done so that Kate might never know the real story ; and Mrs. Falshawe, though she would willingly have sacrificed Champfleury and all that belonged to it to keep her place in her daughter's heart, still secretly clung to the hope that the catastrophe would be averted.

She was so full of this wild hope—so full of the belief that Harry would be their deliverer, that though she listened to Miss Nancy's plans for them—how she and Kate were to come and live with her for good and all, and have no care for the future—she scarcely realised the extent of her old friend's devotion ; and Miss Nancy was too full of her girl's future to notice the lukewarm thanks.

Kate was waiting anxiously.

“I’ve had it out with your mother at last,” said Miss Nancy ; “it is as I thought—some old law business of your father’s. You can’t meddle with it yet ; nor can Harry. Tell him so. The business may make you poor, child ; but you won’t mind ?”

“Not a bit !” said Kate, cheerfully ; “anything but uncertainty. You are looking fagged, Nan. I shall tell Mary to bring your drops.”

CHAPTER III.

MR. CAMELFORD VISITS KINGSTOKE.

LORD CHOMLEIGH was remarkably pleased with himself after that memorable walk in Mill Lane. For three weeks he lived in the most delightful of fool's paradises. His alarm about Kate had turned out groundless, he had won Rosie, he had hoodwinked everybody—in short, he had tumbled on his legs. Keeping the engagement secret, too, was a master-stroke of policy, and, as every-

body astutely took the cue and would not see what was as plain as the noon-day sun, the young man stalked about the place with Miss Nimbus in the fond belief that no one knew the important secret.

One fine morning though a bomb-shell burst inside The Laurels. It came in the shape of a missive from Kingstoke. Lady Chomleigh had returned and begged to have the pleasure of welcoming Mr. and Mrs. Camelford there for a couple of days before she returned to Paris.

His lordship had a little scented note too, bidding him come and help entertain his neighbours. This sent him flying across the road into Mr. Camelford's study, whence in less than half-an-hour he emerged with the paternal blessing. He would not go to Kingstoke though. He would not think of going without Rosie, and, as there was no time to prepare his mother beforehand, he persuaded

Mr. Camelford that it would be best to keep the engagement dark for a little longer, and above all not to breathe a word about it at Kingstoke. When his mother came back from Paris then he would go and tell her all about it with his own lips.

Now this arrangement did not commend itself to Mrs. Camelford's ideas of propriety. For once Laura questioned her lord and master's wisdom. She positively refused to go to Kingstoke under these conditions of secrecy. The fact was she was not altogether pleased with Lady Chomleigh.

Why had Martin been writing to her so much of late? Why did he always put these letters into their little post-box with his own hands?

The green-eyed monster made her bold enough to dispute her husband's authority; and the disputation waxed so hot that at last the whole of the decorous household of

The Laurels was whirled into an hysterical altercation respecting the propriety of paying this visit.

Sudden jibbing from those who habitually look up to you for support and guidance conveys a reproach, and Mr. Camelford was therefore incensed. His newly-acquired dignity could not brook a fretful wife, and to be continually reminded that he was the bone of her bone and the flesh of her flesh was, to say the least of it, trying. He knew it well enough. He was firm, but his firmness was met by a passive resistance that was highly exasperating. The girls sided with their mother: Rosie thought it should be postponed, and Vi declared that Cyril would have counselled its being given up.

Altogether Mr. Camelford had a bad time of it, but it required something more than feminine opposition to make him give up Kingstoke. He had a good deal to say there.

Camelford of Champfleury was not dead yet. There had been a little lull—Mr. Pinnock and his letters had put him off a little—but it had revived stronger than ever after Lady Chomleigh's visit. He had hinted it to his nephew, but so ambiguously that Cyril had not the vaguest idea of his wishes. Mr. Camelford was satisfied though. He had spoken. It now only wanted Lady Chomleigh's promised help to set the affair going with proper *éclat*, and here were his wife and daughters spoiling a chance of chances by their prim ideas of etiquette.

After a little deliberation he determined, with Lord Chomleigh's concurrence, to consult Miss Nancy Stocker, saying of course nothing about Cyril, but simply asking her advice.

Miss Nancy had had a hard time since her return from Champfleury.

The ordeal had been almost too much for

her. She had been ordered home, and was obeying the doctor's orders by resting on the sofa—obeying them rigidly too—knowing full well that every atom of strength would be wanted for her coming encounter with Paul Torrance.

She had written, and was now only waiting for strength to make the start.

Mr. Camelford was rather disconcerted to find she knew all about the engagement.

“Been the talk of the town for weeks! said she. “What is Charley ashamed of? Why doesn't he tell his mother, and let the world know?”

“He has his own notions about it, Miss Nancy,” Mr. Camelford replied, “and we must respect them. He wants the marriage to follow close on the announcement. He hates publicity!”

“So the man said when he was going to be hung,” observed Aunt Nan.

“There is one particular difficulty,” said Mr. Camelford, “which I should like your advice upon. We have received an invitation to Kingstoke, and—well, we scarcely know what to do about it.”

“Accept it by all means! Charley could not have a better chance to take Rosie and tell his mother he had fallen on his legs. It would be true, too!”

“Thank you heartily for that! But his lordship declares there is no time. You see we don’t quite know how she might take it.”

“Ah! That will depend on Madame Maurice. If there is a crease anywhere look out for squalls!”

“There is something wrong too, for she is going back to Paris.”

“Then he had better wait till she comes back.”

“The worst of it is though, Laura won’t

go. Unless the announcement is made she declares she will not pay the visit! She is obstinate, and the girls side with her."

"I wouldn't go to Kingstoke if I was Laura," said Miss Nancy decisively, "just to gape and grin like a lunatic owl whenever Charley's name was mentioned. Why don't you go and face Conny alone?"

The very thing he most desired but dared not mention! The very thing that would lift him out of house worries and enable him to act independently.

"Perhaps that would be best," he said, with a dubious shake of the head, but with a secret elation at his heart that he had great difficulty in hiding. "Thank you for the hint, Miss Stocker. Yes, perhaps that would be best. I'll go at once and propose it to Laura."

But Laura's scruples were not so easily overcome. It took Mr. Camelford a good

hour to make the jealous lady pliable ; and when at length she did yield and sat down to the writing-table it was done under tearful protests and amid the aggressive silence of his daughters.

However, written and dispatched it was, and he was able to go triumphantly across and assure Lord Chomleigh that everything had been satisfactorily arranged, and that he might trust entirely to his discretion at Kingstoke.

He was in luck ! Nothing pleased him better than the prospect of a little delicate manœuvring. It meant no harm to anybody. In deed, his plans were generally for the good of somebody, and especially of Martin Camelford. If he now wished to accentuate his importance by localizing and perpetuating his name at Champfleury who shall blame him ?

Now he was going alone to Kingstoke

he saw no difficulty. He would start fair though. That little doubt about Kate's age, unimportant as it was, must be cleared up, and this he cleverly did by asking her to write her name in a brand-new birthday book, cunningly remarking at the same time that of course he could not ask a lady's age.

"I am nineteen," said Kate simply. So far so good! Then he turned his attention to Mr. Pinnock, and those two letters. Here he did not fare quite so well.

"No, no! Camelford!" said the lawyer, "*you don't draw me*; my business was with Mrs. Falshawe, not with you!"

"I quite understand that, Mr. Pinnock," Mr. Camelford replied; "mine is no idle curiosity though; in fact, I may tell you in confidence that Mrs. Falshawe's business is in a manner mine."

"A nod's as good as a wink," said Mr.

Pinnock, suiting the action to the word. "You've got your eye on Champfleury; I told you that before! but you may as well give it up at once. Any one can see how the cat is jumping there."

"If you allude to these absurd rumours about Miss Falshawe and Dr. Torrance, you are utterly in the wrong! utterly! Why, if you had known anything about the old history of the families you would have known that such a thing was simply impossible. Henry Torrance is no more likely to marry Miss Falshawe, than you are to marry Miss Nancy Stocker!"

"I might do worse!" the lawyer remarked, bristling out his whiskers.

"Now I put it to you," Mr. Camelford continued, "supposing it is as you hint, supposing I *do* wish to foster an alliance between the two houses—do you think it is quite fair and neighbourly on your part

not to be explicit about those two letters you spoke about?"

"And I put it to *you!*" the lawyer retorted hotly, "whether it is quite fair and neighbourly for you to come ruffling it here like a Cochin China cock, and try to worm out my professional secrets? Why, I thought you knew all about the Falshawes."

"I've told you a dozen times, Mr. Pinnock, he was my greatest friend. He had no secrets from me."

"Then you can't want any information from me!"

And after this smart rejoinder Mr. Camelford had to make good his retreat with the best grace he could, vowing, as he walked home, that he never, no never, would have any more dealings with such an arrant snob as this Winford lawyer! As for his letters, they were all bounce!

If there had been anything in them, Mr. Pinnock was the wrong sort of man not to have made somebody wince long before this.

So he started the next day without any misgivings, and enjoyed the dull grandeur of Kingstoke with a light heart.

What happened here would be best learned from two letters which arrived in Flowton a few days after his departure.

The first was from Lady Chomleigh to Miss Nancy Stocker :—

“A thousand pities, my dearest Nan, that you cannot be with us just now. I have no patience with those abominable palpitations. Are you quite sure of your doctor, dear? Has not Miss Posie up there at The Laurels driven him silly? I tell you candidly I would sooner trust my complaint to the veriest old woman in the parish than to a doctor who was under the spell of those *doux yeux*. You should have been with us at Eauxbonnes! That would

have set you up. Quite the most delightful place you ever saw! The funniest hole you can possibly imagine. Just a wicked little world of fashion stuck in a gap in the mountains, where, for six weeks in the year, a parcel of sick sinners gargle and drink sulphur water in the morning, then promenade after lunch in Worth's very newest. There is a ravishing band; and the cures! Miracles, my dear! You should see me! And as for Lady Bulstrode, I give you my word I didn't know her. Before a month was over she was actually slim, with a face like a baby's. Of course you know your neighbour, Miss Posie's father, is here? I had no idea he was such an alarming person. My dear, you have a treasure. He walks about the park, then sails in and talks about 'the demesne.' He spends half his time in the picture-gallery, and takes such a lively interest in our family portraits that I have to invent curious histories for half the old Chomleighs on the walls. Then withall, he is so excruciatingly attentive to your humble servant that were it not for somebody I saw in lavender silk at the head of his table (does she always wear lavender silk, dear?) I believe he would propose to me!

"So full is he of himself that I can't get a

word out of him about Charley. He is ready enough to talk about Champfleury. (I suppose Charley's affair has ended like the rest?) Your *protégé*, he says, is immensely improved, and it is as plain as a pikestaff that he has some designs there. He actually wants *me* to take her in hand, and ask Cyril and the whole flock of Camels here!

"He is not overburdened with modesty. Let me tell you what happened last night. Perhaps he had had a little more champagne than usual. At all events he was painfully confidential. He certainly made love to me. He had sung his song and was seated by my side, maundering on about the comforts of Kingstoke.

"‘It is like a second home already,’ he whispered, and from this waxed so personal that at last I had to tap him with my fan and remind him of my big son.

"‘Ah, Lady Chomleigh,’ he sighed, ‘it seems almost too much happiness for me to think that I should ever stand in the light of a father to that splendid young fellow.’

"‘You dreadful man!’ I cried; ‘go away! I’m afraid of you!’

"‘We must be discreet,’ he said, subsiding into something very like a wink; ‘but I foresee

great happiness. The Camelfords are an old family, Lady Chomleigh' (I wonder he didn't call me Conny!), 'and we shall make it our mutual object to uphold the honour of the house.'

"I have had a great many encounters, Nan, but for sheer cold-bloodedness this beat anything I ever went through. Just fancy poor me crouching in a corner with this amatory panoply of starch making eyes and talking like this! Luckily there is a subject he is always eager to discuss, so I led him on to Champfleury, and he was full of Miss Kate and Cyril in a jiffy. How very funny it is that no one knows that girl's age! and my fat admirer is so interested about it now that he is actually going up to Brixton to see old Paul! He is most indefatigable! As for me, dear, I am going to Paris. I must! Maurice has disappointed me abominably, but directly I return I will come and show you what she has done for your

"Loving coz.

"CONNIE."

The other was from Mr. Camelford to his wife, dated two days later from the Junior Carlton Club.

“MY DEAR LAURA,

“Don’t expect me home for a few days yet. I had to run up here on business, and now have to go on to Paris. I’ll tell you all about it when I get back. Love to the girls.

“Your affectionate husband.”

The effect of the first letter was to send Miss Nancy off into a brown study, and the effect of the second was to send Mrs. Camelford off into downright hysterics.

Her husband had sent back his body-servant James with this shabby, scrubby little note. This of itself had a nasty suspicious look about it.

James was charged to deliver it immediately, and accordingly it came into his wife’s hands in the tennis-tent, where she was superintending the tea while the young people played their game. Their attention was first attracted to her by a series of pop-gun exclamations, and the next moment

she had thrown herself back in the seat, shrieking frantically to her daughters that their father had left them for ever.

So violent and unexpected was the attack, that, rackets in hands, they stood gaping and staring round her like a set of ninnies.

Vi was the first to become practical—"We must get her indoors," she said, with decision. Whereupon Lord Chomleigh (now quite strong again) lifted the shrieking lady up in his arms, carried her across the lawn into the drawing-room, and there deposited her on a sofa without saying a single word.

CHAPTER IV.

MISS NANCY STOCKER VISITS DEAN HOUSE.

IF Miss Nancy Stocker had not been so worried, as her cook Judy put it, no one would have enjoyed the Kingstoke adventure and what came of it more than she. The letters had given her a peep behind the scenes, and she could easily fill in the byeplay that had led to this racy result.

She could almost have repeated the very words whereby Lady Conny had cajoled Mr.

Camelford into going off to Paris on the detective business. Comical as it was, it precipitated matters with her, for with Conny and Mr. Camelford buzzing about Paul Torrance she felt it would be unsafe to postpone her interview with him any longer. She had quite counted the cost. She knew well enough that after she had taken Mrs. Falshawe's sins on her shoulders the world would see a little blur on a name she held in jealous reverence.

She knew it but did not flinch. It was for Katie's sake; so the little lady buckled on her armour and determined to get the Brixton battle over as soon as she could. It was a good time to slip away, for Kate was then stopping with the Burgoynes.

Girls like to know each other's business, and dearly love to have a finger in any pie they think may contain a brace of turtle-doves; and these friends, being interested in

both the doves, persuaded Kate to come to them for a day or two's change after her nursing, and did their very best to fan the dormant flame.

Miss Nancy seized the chance with her usual promptitude. She wrote off at once to Paul Torrance, saying she would call on him the next day.

"Post this," she said to Jessie, "and order the White Hart fly to be here in time to catch the evening train from Winford. Get ready to go with me to London—but mind—*no blabbing!*"

Jessie went off dumbfounded; but Judy, by reason of her longer service, was open-mouthed against the idea of her mistress bouncing off to London from her sick bed at that time o' day, and relieved her mind by rating Mary all through the packing operations. It was all done though with the same celerity that used to mark Miss Nancy's

sudden starts with her father, but she smiled grimly when she thought what a crooked affair this was compared to those which used to send them flying across the Continent.

At the station they ran against Mr. Pinnock bound on one of his London trips. He looked after their comforts, but, whatever he might have thought, said never a word about their traveling so late. At Euston, however, while Mary was looking after the luggage he put his head inside the cab, and said, "Sharp work this, Miss Nancy! Some trouble with Champfleury, eh?"

A peppery answer was on the tip of her tongue, then she remembered she had built a glass house for herself and must be careful in the throwing of stones. "I've come on my own business, Mr. Pinnock," she said, quietly.

"I know; all right! but, look here: you may want a friend, and Hummums will find me. Old Paul hasn't a leg to stand upon.

Snap your fingers at him and send for me if he bothers you."

The full drift of this was utterly lost on Miss Nancy; besides, what were hints to her when in a little all the world would be pointing its finger at her? So she thanked him curtly, pulled up the window, and drove off to the hotel.

After a good night's rest she started next morning with Mary for Dean House. She had never seen Paul Torrance. The photograph her father showed her years ago was certainly not prepossessing, but she was frank enough to say you should never judge people and potatoes by their looks.

Being a friend of Mrs. Falshawe she could not very well be a friend of Paul Torrance, and the mutual antagonism had grown as it always does grow for want of being rubbed off.

Every cabman knew the place. A square

house between four square walls, uncommonly like a private lunatic asylum, as Mr. Pinnock had observed.

Sure enough, too, there came to the outer door the same lanky, long-haired man who had frightened the lawyer so quickly off the premises. As Miss Stocker was expected though, there was no parleying, and Mr. ex-Hamlet, civilly bidding them walk towards the house, hurried off with her card.

No sooner were they left unprotected than down swooped the famous goose upon them like Attila upon Italy, with such angry demonstrations too, such stiffening of the neck, such hissings and wing-flappings, that Miss Nancy in pure self-defence had ignominiously to squat down then and there, and open her umbrella, while Jessie gave battle. Suddenly there was a shout, and out of the distance old Paul came flying to them in his wheeled-chair, dashing up with a crunch on

the gravel that sent the gander waddling off as fast as his legs could carry him.

“A poor welcome, Miss Stocker!” said the old gentleman, with a smile. “Upon my word any goose ought to have known better. Pray come in and let me make amends.”

She looked at Paul Torrance, but could see no trace of the old portrait in the mild blue-eyed old gentleman with the neatly-cropped white beard, who smilingly held out his hand to her.

“I knew your father,” he went on, when they got inside the house, “and, though I have not that ‘alacrity of spirit nor cheer of mind that I was wont to have,’ I have still enough left to welcome Sir Richard’s daughter. You look tired. Take this low seat—Mrs. Sidon’s own couch; but before we begin I will ask my servant to show your maid all my treasures. That will keep her amused while we discuss business.”

The chair rolled away, and Miss Nancy had a moment or two to pull herself together and look round. She was surrounded by stage remembrances. On the walls were portraits of celebrated actors in their principal parts, set off by a decorative arrangement of swords, walking-sticks, daggers, and other properties which had been used by them.

There were bowls and drinking-cups on the mantelshelf. There was a pair of slippers under a glass shade, and the solitary bookshelf was crammed full of Shakesperian lore. She had not half taken it all in before old Paul noiselessly rolled back again.

“Now for it, Miss Stocker,” he began. “I got your letters. You have come from Mrs. Falshawe?”

“Yes; I have something to tell you about Champfleury.”

“Ah!”

“Something that should have been told years ago! It is not hers! Those wills were changed at the last moment. The wrong will was signed. Listen, Mr. Torrance! *I did it*. It was I that burnt the right will, and attested the wrong one.”

“You mean to say,” he observed quietly, “that you changed the wills?”

“Oh, yes! I changed them!” she said, quickly, so as to get the lie over as soon as she could. “You see, Marian was a friend of mine, and the temptation was too great. So easily done, too, with a blind woman! Oh, yes; I burnt the right will with my own hands!”

His mild eyes never left her while she was making this remarkable statement, and the gentle shake of the head, the smile, and the soft “Ah” that escaped him after the tarra-diddle was out, rather disconcerted her.

“Marian Falshawe,” she jerked on, “has

been in trouble about it ever since. She could not act without compromising me. You will understand, Sir, we are very old friends. I knew her father. I have been able to do her some service, so she naturally felt a compunction in speaking. It is all arranged now. She will give up Champfleury, and I shall provide for her and her child."

He made no answer.

She looked impatiently for some sort of response to this proposition of retributive justice, but none came. A downright good blowing-up, or a righteous burst of indignation, would have been infinitely less trying than that quiet stare through the half-closed eyes, and that monotonous putting together of the white hands. It grew so irksome at last that she went on with a wild little laugh.

"It did not seem to do them much good.

Both she and her husband were frightened. When your brother came they were in mortal terror. To get rid of him she wrote those letters at her husband's dictation. So you see the business did not thrive from the very first."

"Wait a bit!" said he, moving a little nearer. "Did you say that Richard Falshawe was frightened? Dashing Dick! Handsome Dick!

'A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man?'

No! no! you must be mistaken. Surely, dashing Dick was not frightened?"

"He was! A man must be pretty badly frightened too to make his wife write those letters!"

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, I'll vouch for the truth of it!"

"Would you like to read these letters,

Miss Stocker? See!" said he, suddenly pulling a packet out of his pocket, "I am prepared for you!"

"No, I won't see them! I won't look at them. They were written entirely at his dictation. They are not her letters, save in the writing. Now she wants restitution made to you. We are old, but we have time to do this work, and we ought to be thankful for it."

"Restitution! Oh, yes! Restitution of course," he said, abstractedly. "And dashing Dick was frightened, was he! Ha! ha! well. I never expected to hear that! I *never* heard of anything that could frighten dashing Dick!"

"Fright did it all! Now we have to make amends for the past. The daughter need know nothing about it. We have only the past to look to. She has the future."

"Ah! by the way! This daughter! I've

heard of her. She is a pet of yours? You love her?"

"They call me her little mother," said Miss Nancy.

"In that case," said he, quickly, "you can tell me the child's age?"

"That man Camelford has been at you!" she exclaimed, involuntarily.

"He came with your cousin, Lady Chomleigh. It appears he has an interest in knowing."

"Nonsense! About as much interest as I have in knowing his. Conny has got him by the nose! They have been told a dozen times that Kate is nineteen. She was born in France."

"That is precisely what he has gone to verify."

"Gone!"

"Started this morning, I believe; so did Lady Chomleigh. I don't give my confidence

to every idle gossip who plucks my sleeve, or I might have spared their shoe-leather. *Kate Falshawe was not born in France!* ”

“What dy’e mean?” cried Miss Nancy, in angry alarm.

“I mean,” said he, propelling his chair round the corner of the table, and bringing it up with a jerk to her side, as if it were furnished with some patent brake, “I mean there is no record at all of the girl’s birth! None! I have a friend in Paris, stage-struck like myself—M. L’Estrange, the avocat. He has made inquiries. There is no record—none! Think what this means, Miss Stocker! Think! Think! It means that she is not entitled to the Champfleury estates. So you see it was not much for the mother to give it up after all! A cheap sort of sacrifice! Eh?”

She sat gaping at him for some time without moving. Then as the terrible meaning

of the words took hold of her she jumped up and paced the room like a mad-woman. So great was the sudden horror of the thing that her tongue refused to utter a single syllable. If she could have given her small life then and there to spare her girl one thought of disgrace she would have done it cheerfully. But the poor little body was helpless! She paced to and fro in dumb despair, till a stab of the old pain made her clutch the back of Mrs. Siddons's gilded couch so as to steady herself and gain breath for her words.

“Paul Torrance!” she gasped, “take Champfleury. Take all. Take what I have—everything! but for God’s sake say nothing of this! Ah, sir! she is so young, so good, so noble! You don’t know what Kate is. How could you? So different to others! She is proud—you would kill her. I say you shall not! Ah, sir! Dear sir! Kind sir!”

What more the perturbed little body would have said or done nobody knows. I believe in her extremity she was going on her knees to old Paul; but suddenly a mist filled the room; the old actors disappeared from their frames; swords, daggers, sticks, and bowls got jumbled up with the slippers, and, with an awful stab of pain, she fell headlong at his feet.

* * * * *

How quickly and tenderly she was cared for she never knew. Her swoon must have lasted for some time, for when she opened her eyes she was lying full length on Mrs. Siddons's couch, with old Paul on one side and Jessie on the other.

“And she came off in spite of his warning, eh?” the old man was whispering.

“Yes; nothing can stop her, sir, when once she takes her way,” Jessie replied in the same tone. “She got knocked up at

Champfleury attending Mrs. Falshawe. We were there all the time, so was Dr. Torrance."

"Ah!"

Here Miss Nancy made an effort to rise.

"Lie still! Lie still!" he said, tenderly, as she fell back. "Jessie! that glass of wine! There, that's right! Now"—looking at his watch—"you will rest here for one hour, then we will finish our chat. But mind you, all the talking will be on my side. You have said enough." And with this he glided out, leaving her to chew the bitter cud, and puzzle her head how to face and tackle this last horror.

She had the whole story now with a vengeance! No wonder now at Marian Falshawe's persistent gloom and terror; no wonder at her shilly-shally and want of pluck! But how to keep it all from Kate? This was the nut that she could not crack, and

this it was that made that hour so terrible to the little mother lying there helpless on the gilded couch, with the old actors ranting at her from their frames. At last some unbidden tears came, and through their beneficent haze she began to get a peep of the silver lining to this cloud, dark as it was. At the expiration of the hour Mr. Hamlet set a dainty little lunch before her, and she was able to sip up the soup and prepare herself to hear what Paul Torrance had to say.

The first thing this gentleman did when he came in was to pack Jessie off to get her dinner; then, finding the little lady anxious and ready to hear him, he wheeled his chair close to her side, and commenced quietly.

“You came to make a little confession to me, Miss Stocker, and I am going to make one to you; and what I shall tell you,” said he with a smile, “is true.”

She flushed a little, and he went on.

“I have been more than twenty years playing a blindfold game with Champfleury from this wheeled chair. I have never lost the chance of a fresh move, and always knew I should say check sooner or later. You have only just begun. You are a novice, and have no sort of chance with me! You knew my mother. She was mad. What else, Miss Stocker, could make her hate me—her crippled child? What else could make her blot me out from her heart because I liked the stage? I have never seen a play acted. I have lived within these four walls—the Brixton Wizard. I have never been out, but I have made an artificial horizon of the outside world by means of the stage. My friends are the actors, and I am their friend in their troubles. I know them and they know me. Don’t think ill of the stage, for I can see the time when it will become a mighty national

instrument in teaching and enforcing the highest truths to the million. A craze, you say! Never mind, let it pass. My brother Henry was a gentle, gallant, light-hearted man—nobody's enemy but his own. He paid the penalty. He used to tell me about Champfleury, and I knew about the two wills. *I was sure they were changed*, but what could I do? How could I prove it? What could I do but begin my game of watch and ward from this old chair? I sent Henry to Champfleury when the Falshawes returned. That was my first move, and it failed. He got into trouble, but don't think he died of a broken heart! Grief could never kill him. He died of inflammation of the lungs following exposure after a yachting accident. He was a man who could only see the bright side of things, and his son is like him. One thing came from his disastrous visit to Champfleury. I found out that Mrs. Fal-

shawe was consumed with fright. On this I have worked. It is astounding how little it takes to keep up a scare! Two or three words on a scrap of paper, ever so small a reminder by post to remind her I was biding my time, was enough. Then my next move was to get Henry's son there. A difficult job, for with all his father's gentleness he is not pliable. He not only has a strong will of his own but a dangerous determination in working it out. He has been the light and stay of my life. Nothing discourages him, and, if the old saw speaks truly about a contented mind, why it will be impossible for Harry to starve. Chance favoured me about getting him to Champfleury, and you see this move has been successful. Fear has brought her to my feet! My turn has come, Miss Stocker!"

"Kate! poor Kate!" murmured Miss Nancy.

“Take heart, Miss Stocker,” said he, quickly, “take heart—I won’t injure her. You say that these letters (pulling them out again) were dictated by Richard Falshawe? Good! I believe that part of your story, and the daughter shall never know anything about them. We will destroy them.” And herewith he jerked himself to the fire-place, crumpled them upon the hearth, lighted a vesta, and set them ablaze.

“Thank you for that!” said Miss Nancy, holding out her hand.

“I am amply repaid,” he said, with a little touch of gratified pride, “if it has taken any of your trouble off you; but remember, even though these letters are consumed to ashes, and even though it were possible that Champfleury could be handed over in the innocent way you have proposed, *we are still in the dark about the young lady’s birth.*”

Miss Nancy Stocker had prepared her

reply. She had thought it out, and, when the old gentleman ceased, sat up very deliberately, smoothed her dress, and with a rapid touch at her head-gear spoke as follows: "Do not think, Mr. Torrance, that I speak boldly now, just because those letters are snuffed out. I thank you for the act; but still, sir, it was only an act that might have been expected from a gentleman. What you hint about Kate's birth is unworthy of you. I have thought it out, sir, while lying here, and I should be a disloyal woman if I did not lift up my voice against such a vile aspersion. I know Marian Falshawe, but, though she were the veriest stranger to me, I would stamp on this vile slander. Sir, it is a lie! Marian Falshawe is weak, but she is pure. Take what is yours, sir, but leave this lie alone."

And having thus delivered herself she resumed her recumbent position, leaving the

old gentleman in the wheeled-chair completely dumbfounded by the tremendous charge. He had expected approbation for his magnanimity in burning those letters, and got a cold douche instead. The worst of it was he felt he deserved it.

“You have spoken well, Miss Stocker,” he said, after a pause. “Perhaps my zeal in the game has led me astray; if so, I am sorry. We can do no more now till Mrs. Falshawe speaks in *propria personâ*.”

“She shall come and see you,” said Miss Stocker, very decisively; “and remember, you must take Champfleury, and I must make what amends I can to Marian Falshawe. I must thank you, too, for your toleration.”

“All right, Miss Stocker,” said he, with that curious smile; “so we will say no more till I have seen the lady.”

She was glad to find herself back in the

carriage with Jessie by her side, for there was more work to be done before the day was over. Old Paul gave her a courteous farewell at the gate, and as she drove along she arranged her plans. The first thing she did (not being quite sure whether she would be able to travel back home the next day, so fagged was she) was to write a peremptory letter to Mrs. Falshawe, telling her not to lose one single moment in confuting what she had heard.

Then she turned her attention to Mr. Camelford, and only wished she had her sweet cousin there just for a short five minutes to give her a bit of her mind.

This prying visit to Paris must be put a stop to at once. How could she do it? How could she find Mr. Camelford? Suddenly she thought of a person who could and would find him if he was to be found on the

face of this earth, and this was none other than lawyer Pinnock.

A startling idea. But why not try him? He had offered his services, why not get him to go and bring Mr. Camelford back? He was irrepressibly officious (so much in his favour now), but she believed he was trustworthy. She wasted no time over it. With her usual fire she sent off a commissionaire at once to the Hummuns, and within half-an-hour the lawyer was by her side.

“Will you go as far as Paris for me?” said she.

“Yes; further if needs be!”

“Can you start to-night?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Camelford is there somewhere, most likely at Meurice’s. I want him to get this letter without delay. Now you must not ask me one word about it yet; and you’ll be doing me a great service.”

“Mum’s the word, Miss Nancy! I’ll try Meurice’s first, and hunt him up from that. I’m not going to ask you what it’s all about; but, mind you, if there is any trouble about a will, John Pinnock will see you through it!”

Miss Nancy’s note to Mr. Camelford was as short and sweet as herself:

“Come back at once! I have just seen Paul Torrance. You have been sent off on a fool’s errand. You can make your peace with Laura by buying the wedding-presents.

“NANCY STOCKER.”

CHAPTER V.

THE LOVE CHASE.

MISS NANCY STOCKER was wont to say what has been said by many a one before her, and will be repeated by many a one after her, that every woman is more or less of a coquette—that the coquetting function is born with them, and taken to as naturally as chicken take to scratch the gravel. In fact, that it is an expression of hereditary memory and by no means a reproach to the sex.

This is what she said to her friends, but woe betide any one of them who would have dared call Kate Falshawe a coquette ; still it looked like it. The girl knew perfectly well why Harry Torrance was hanging, lingering about the place, and never so much as hinting about going, after old Doctor Ford's return. She knew well enough, what the rest of the world was beginning to know, that the young man was now desperately in love with her, and no doubt the knowledge had brought with it a becoming consciousness of increased dignity. More than once that abominable letter had made her cut short an open declaration of his passion, and, though she knew she would meet him at the Burgoynes, she went without any compunction or wavering.

The fact was Harry had not only crept inside Champfleury but inside Miss Kate Falshawe's heart as well. And who can

wonder at it? He had come there branded and bracketed as their enemy, but in the time of sickness and trouble had proved their friend. He had sworn allegiance to them and would fight their battles. Like the prince in the fairy tale, he had come and opened the gates of Castle Dolorous. He had let in the sun upon Champfleury, and lightened their troubles by the sheer joyousness of his nature and by that masterful vivacity which swept everything away that impeded the view of the bright side of things.

Since his stay at Champfleury her mother had been a changed woman. Kate had never seen her so well, so happy, so contented. It seemed as if the wearing trouble which had weighed them all down had grown from nothing—a mountain from a molehill: some old money affair of her father's, with which, as Aunt Nan had rightly said, it

would be unbecoming to meddle. They would be poor, but what of that compared to the old state of misery that was eating her mother's heart out?

The puzzle was, why had her mother allowed it to go on so long? She saw an end to it now, and took heart accordingly. Some of the old wilful dash came back and she was more gracious to her patient lover. She could not help being touched by his devotion, and perhaps was not altogether superior to a little gratified vanity at the pleasant pertinacity of his suit. Then, you see, he was mixed up with their trouble; and what cherishes and sweetens a growing intimacy between two young people more than a little mysterious family trouble which demands mutual confidence?

So, altogether, Mr. Henry Torrance's wooing sped well in that old-fashioned ivy-covered house of the Burgoynes. He had

a better chance there than at Champfleury, where the associations were awkward. They could speak more freely, and so perhaps they did on every conceivable point but the especial ever-abiding, all-engrossing, one that was insisting more strongly every hour on being brought to a satisfactory issue.

One fine morning though, the very day before Kate's return home, the necessity of bringing matters to a crisis came home to Harry with the force of a sledge-hammer. He had called at Miss Nancy's, and after a little fencing with Judy (whose face crimsoned as she tried to hide the fact) found that her mistress had gone off to London.

This meant she had gone to Brixton to talk over that letter with his uncle; and, though the young gentleman up to this time had steadily kept aloof from the squabble, he saw things differently now. Who could tell what obstacles may not crop up

between him and his heart's desire from this interview? He must be prepared. He must act. So he set off at once at a smart pace across the fields to the Burgoynes, sagely thinking if he could only once get her promise nothing in the wide world would move her from it.

Planning is one thing though, and putting that plan into execution is another. "Man proposes and God disposes"; but here it so happened that the unfortunate man could not even propose. He could not get the ghost of a chance. The moment he set his foot inside the house he was pounced upon by the children. They were getting up a paper-chase for to-morrow, to come off before Kate left. He must be a hare, he must be a hound, umpire, starter; anything, everything, except left alone with Kate.

He did manage after an hour or so to tell Kate he had something to say to her, but

no sooner were the words out of his mouth than in bounced Lord Chomleigh with Rosie and Vi, and the chatter burst out afresh. Then he declined upon stratagem. Under pretence of imparting some secret information about the paper-chase he inveigled little Effie Burgoyne into the garden, and then sent her back for Kate.

He stood impatiently in the shade of the thick trees watching the French windows, and presently his heart gave a great thump when the curtains were withdrawn and he saw his darling step out into the broad sunshine.

She stopped for a moment and shaded her face with the Japanese umbrella she had caught up, then came on to the sward, and walked proudly towards him like the queen she was.

"I know what you have to tell me," she said, quickly, "they are talking about it

inside. Aunt Nan has been to London. What has taken her there?"

"To see my uncle, I suppose, about that letter."

"And you never told me!"

"I only knew of it just now. She is expected back to-day or to-morrow. I have a deal to say about it, Kate."

"Something fresh *has* happened then! Tell me at once!"

"Nothing fresh has happened. Mrs. Falshawe is well and happy. I saw her as I came along."

"But what could have taken Aunt Nan away so suddenly, ill as she was too? Depend upon it she has heard something fresh. You know we may have to leave Champfleury?"

"Never! never! I say no harm shall come to you or yours, Kate! I swear it."

She raised her eyes to his at the unusual

vehemence of his words, but there his great love shone out so palpably that she dropped them again with a sudden blush that sent the hot blood coursing through his veins, and forced the long pent-up words from his mouth.

“Kate!” he whispered, seizing her hand as she was moving off, “don’t go till you have heard me!”

“To-morrow!” she cried, struggling in his grasp.

“To-morrow may be too late! Listen, Kate—I love you! Do you hear? I love you! It must have been from the very first. Ah, my queen! you are too good, too honest, too candid to trifle. Tell me,” he whispered, “tell me you will be my wife, and give me this right to protect you and yours for ever.”

No doubt after their slight skirmishes Kate had expected a warmer attack at some

time or other, but she never expected to have this avalanche of words poured into her ear ; so rapidly and impetuously too that she could only remember the sweet refrain, "I love you, Kate ! I love you !"

She never expected it from this self-contained young gentleman who now kept hold of her hand. His eyes were moist with the intensity of his passion. He was quivering with hope and expectation, and looking ever so handsome. She was shrinking from his gaze, frightened—fascinated—pleased ; when lo ! Effie burst in upon them with, "Katie, dear, you'll be a hare, won't you ?"

An unfortunate anticlimax ! To be reminded of the prowess of her girlhood, to be asked to be a hare at such a supreme moment, was, to say the least of it, trying ; and so utterly confused was she that, without counting the cost, she promised ; and,

to Harry's chagrin, was led away to complete the arrangements.

Love and death, they say, always come with a shock however much expected, and Harry's declaration had come with such a shock to Kate's girlhood as almost to shake her out of it. She loved him; she acknowledged that. But—but—ah; what a peck of buts there were. What if she were poor instead of rich and had nothing to offer him? What if he had suddenly learned they were to lose Champfleury, and had spoken on the spur of the moment out of pure pity? What if some disgrace attached to them for having held Champfleury so long?

These were the thoughts that scampered helter-skelter through her brain for the rest of the day, tempering her new bliss with such doubts and fears that in the morning the young lady had come to the resolution of avoiding her lover until she had seen Aunt

Nan and heard the result of her hurried visit to old Paul Torrance. Of course she would not run in the paper-chase. If she had had her wits about her she never would have promised. But so loud was the howl of disappointment from Effie at the bare mention of such perfidy that Kate felt there would be less fuss in running than in shirking it. She would just give a lead to Effie and then drop out of it unobserved.

To her utter amazement Harry appeared with the party from The Laurels. This was too bad of him! He might have had the generosity to stop away for that day at all events. It showed a want of consideration, and Miss Kate's temper rose up against it.

She would not give up running now—no! not for twenty Harrys! He had no right there, and he may think it unfeminine if he liked.

So off she started, with a bag of paper-

scraps at her girdle, and a scrap or two of wilful bravado at her heart.

The girl in her was battling with the woman, and getting the best of it. All she had to do was to keep a wary eye behind, and not allow herself to be cut off, surprised, and captured by her inconsiderate lover.

But this is precisely what the young man intended. In fact he had come with the solemn determination of gaining her promise before she saw Miss Nancy; and such speed did this lend to his feet that very soon after the start Kate's first glance behind showed that he had come in sight and was gaining steadily on her every moment. Do what she could she felt that by sheer speed of foot he would come up with her at the furthest part of the course. She wouldn't give in though. Her blood was up, and if she could not beat him by speed she would beat him by cunning, anything sooner than be

run down and caught. A mile and a-half would take her to Champfleury, she was going home that day—why not go on now and leave Harry at fault? She knew every inch of the ground, so instead of skirting the distant hill she crept over it under cover of a thick hedge, crossed the brook, and, throwing away the bag, walked leisurely towards Champfleury.

Harry came up, looked in vain for the paper-scrap, made a false start, then, with a sudden inspiration, remembered it was the nearest point to Champfleury. In half-a-minute he was over the hill. The bag of paper told the story, and away he went.

Kate was within a quarter of a mile of the park before she knew she was followed. She could run like a deer, or rather like Atalanta, and she would run now if she died for it.

So, drawing a deep breath and clenching her teeth, off she set with Prince Milanion at

her heels. She had clambered through the hedge, and was in the very act of jumping on to the turf, when, lo ! there was Harry straight before her. He had cleared hedge, ditch, and all, with a lover's bound and stood waiting to receive her. Stop herself she could not. She hesitated, jumped,—jumped badly, and would have tumbled at his feet if he had not caught her in his arms.

She had lost her hat, that unmanageable hair of hers had come down about her shoulders, her face was muddy, she was in dreadful disarray. She lay panting in his arms, her face was close to his, so—so—he kissed her !

She *did* manage to tear herself away then, but that was all she could do, for, however much disposed you may be to give a person a bit of your mind, it can't be done without breath. Poor Kate had none. In fact, so breathless was she that she involuntarily

sank on the same log where Harry was already seated with his head between his hands, as if dazed at his recent daring.

Then, in a second, the absurdity of the attitude struck her so forcibly that she jumped up and marched off with her bedraggled skirts without saying one word.

A most outrageous proceeding !

She was not only angry with him for supposing she would submit tamely, but doubly angry with herself for sitting down there by his side, as if, forsooth, she was inviting him to recommence their yesterday's conversation. And the Burgoynes, too, what would they think of her leaving them in this fashion ?

Altogether Miss Kate was so overwhelmed with shame and confusion, and so torn with uncertainty as to what would happen next, that by the time she reached Champfleury she was ready to cry with vexation. Here

a surprise awaited her. Her mother had gone off by the afternoon train.

“Where to, Miss Kate,” said the astounded Mr. Townes, with an offended shake of the head, “I don’t know. It was sudden enough to take your breath away. I think she is in some trouble. Janey has gone with her, and Janey is always a damper. But there is a note for you, Miss Kate, in the boudoir, and one from Miss Stocker too.”

Kate read them both before she changed her dress. Her mother’s did not make things clear by any means. She had to go away for a few days on business, she said, and Kate had better spend the time with Aunt Nan. Aunt Nan’s was simply to bid her come.

CHAPTER VI.

MISS NANCY'S PERPLEXITIES.

THE day of Effie's paper-chase made an important and chequered chapter in Miss Kate Falshawe's life.

It began with the dawning of new hopes—with a pleasing sense of trust and triumph, and with some trumpery misgivings, and ended with the sudden reappearance of the family skeleton.

This unwelcome familiar stepped into the

carriage with her, sat down by her side, and worried her with ominous words all the way to Flowton. "Why couldn't this money business be managed without so much mystery?" it said as they drove along. "Depend upon it there is some ugly disgrace attached to your name or you would not have been kept in the dark. What has made Miss Nancy Stocker and your mother pop up to London so suddenly? Whatever it is you ought to know it, and not think of Harry till it is cleared up."

"Not think of Harry!" The words kept dinning and ringing about her head with horrible iteration—the very wheels repeated it as they spun round, "not think of Harry!" with his words still stirring her heart and his kiss still tingling on her cheek.

She must think of him, though the remembrance filled her with shame and confusion.

Everything—like that wretched chase—had been too hurried for sober reflection; and so black and confused was the outlook that all she could do when she got inside Miss Nancy's cosy room was to cry out in a helpless sort of way, "What does it all mean, Aunt Nan?"

Miss Nancy was expecting her. She was sitting up ready to receive her, in her smartest cap and ribbons—trying to look cheery, though the marks of her late fatigue and trial were written plainly enough on her face.

"All right, Kate!" she replied in a doleful sort of chirrup, and then winked and blinked and put on a knowing look whereby Kate was to understand she had done something so uncommonly clever that she need be under no apprehension for the future. But such a pitiful failure was it that Kate's heart was touched in spite of her own

trouble. All she said was, "I think you could have told me, Nan." But it was said in a way that Miss Nancy knew the girl was not to be put off much longer by sham words and looks.

"Patience, Kate!" she said sharply.

"Will you tell me what I have to be patient about?" Kate asked as she took off her hat.

"It can't be told just yet. That was explained to you before."

"Explained! Nothing was explained—nothing! But you must tell me now. There is something bad! some disgrace. Don't be afraid! Tell me! Out with it!"

And she flung off her hat as if she meant to fling off some imaginary disgrace.

"You must wait till your mother comes back, Kate. Don't be foolish!"

"You must tell me now, Nan! this mo-

ment! Only yesterday Harry said to-morrow would be too late."

"What on earth has Harry to do with it?"

"Oh, Nan!" and up went Kate's hands to hide her flaming face.

"Kate!" cried Miss Nancy, starting out of her chair with a flush of delight, "is it as I have wished and prayed? Tell me! you are my child you know! He loves you, Kate! I have seen it for ever so long! Has he told you? Have you made him happy?"

"Don't! don't!" cries Kate from behind her hands. "It has been a wretched day! a mistake from beginning to end."

"What happened to-day?"

"Oh, I don't know! Effie had a paper-chase. He ought not to have been there. I never supposed he would have come. Effie wanted me to run with her you know—and——"

"Ah! he chased you."

"Nan!" she cried suddenly, dropping her hands, "*Nan, he kissed me!*"

"Serve you right!" says Aunt Nan, putting on her ancestral eyes and surveying the girl from top to toe. "No man ever courted me, but if he did I think I should expect to be kissed!"

In the joy of her heart that this had come about she forgot her troubles; forgot for a moment that there were rocks ahead which might wreck all her hopes. Her eyes twinkled with fun and happiness as she looked at Kate, but poor Kate could not respond. For once the pleasant old banter jarred upon her, and all she could do was to creep up to the sofa, fling her arms round little mother's neck and burst into a flood of tears like any poor-hearted school-girl.

Plucky as she was, Kate was but human,

intensely human, as Cyril Camelford observed, and that day she had had so many new experiences, and been buffeted about in so many different ways, that Dame Nature demanded some compensation for these attacks on her fortress, and took it out in the shape of tears. Miss Nancy knew better than to stop them. Precious tears they were, for they refreshed and invigorated Miss Kate as the summer rain refreshed and invigorated her Champfleury uplands.

After she had made her confession she said, "You see you must tell me now, Nan. How can I face Harry when he comes to-morrow if you don't?"

"My dear Kate!" replied she, "just think for one moment! What would your mother say to me if I was to blab about your father's affairs? See Harry to-morrow when he comes, and tell him what you have told me."

Kate was silenced but not convinced. Next day, however, she received Harry like a sensible, proper-minded young person. Matters were too serious—too critical—for any senseless scene; and the whole honest truth between them rang out in their first words: “Harry!” “Kate!”

Then Miss Nancy's perplexities broke out afresh. She had brought them together and now could not keep them quiet. She had conjured up a brace of Frankensteins to plague her. Kate jumped out of all control; and so elated was Harry that he was only prevented from going straight off to Brixton by Miss Nancy shamming to be more ill than she really was, and declaring that if he went up before Mrs. Falshawe had completed her business he would ruin everything!

She had even to improvise an imaginary correspondence with Mrs. Falshawe in order

to keep them quiet ; but day after day passed and the runaway made no sign.

Kate had had one letter from Brown's Hotel. Her mother might be detained, it said. That was all. After that dead silence, a letter to the manager only eliciting the information that Mrs. Falshawe had left the hotel some days.

No wonder then that the girl began to be consumed by a smouldering impatience which threatened to blaze out and scorch them, and no wonder poor Miss Nancy was put to her wit's end to prevent it. She wrote a conciliatory letter to old Paul, thinking, perhaps, she might hear something from that source ; but the answer—reassuring though it was—begging her on no account to come up until her strength was equal to the journey—did not contain Mrs. Faishawe's name.

She had to put a good face on it too.

Like a strayed dog in the street, who wags his tail or shows his teeth to every unwelcome questioner, so the poor little lady had to answer everybody—make the best of it—and lie all round.

To the Rector and to the Burgoynes she felt compelled to hint that Mrs. Falshawe had gone to town about the marriage settlements; and drew such a fancy picture of the wedding, with little Effie as one of the bridesmaids, that they went away in a state of anticipatory excitement.

Then came Mr. Camelford—for this gentleman had returned not one bit abashed by his Parisian experiences. Abashed! He was more self-confident than ever! What was Mr. Pinnock's mission but a tribute to his own importance?

"I thank you for it, Miss Nancy!" he said, with lofty serenity; "it was a discreet thought! Mr. Pinnock came back to London

with me, and sent his compliments to you. He was about to write, too, I believe. I acted on your suggestion about the wedding presents. That, too, was a discreet thought. The Palais Royal is an excellent mart."

"Well! I hope you propitiated your wife!"

"Laura is peculiar," said he, "very peculiar. In most cases she is docile, in this she is adamant! You know her, Miss Stocker, well; you never I am sure would think her capable of spurning my gifts? She did though! I remembered her particular taste in dress. I bought her her favourite lavender silk. I give you my word she threw it aside without even opening it!"

"No wonder, when you go running off to Paris with Conny!"

"An entire misapprehension, Miss Stocker, an entire misapprehension," he said, with a pleased smile; "she neither went nor

returned with me. I should like this known for the sake of her ladyship's good name."

"If I had been Laura I would have thrown your silk out of the window!"

"But my dear Miss Stocker, you know what my wishes have been about Champfleury—you were antagonistic, but let that pass! You must have felt how impossible it was for me to make any confidant till I felt the ground safe beneath me. I had to be circumspect from the first, and doubly so after this proposed alliance with the Chomleigh family. You were antagonistic, as I before said; but I think you ought to have given me some hint of this—this—er"

"This what?"

"Well, this fiasco. We can call it nothing else! Oh! of course, we know, my dear Miss Stocker, that you were always in Mrs. Falshawe's confidence! We know she kept aloof from the county! We know she

shunned *me*! No wonder! Ha! ha! No wonder! Poor Kate! Poor girl! Nay, nay!" he went on with a deprecatory wave of his hand, "I know exactly what you would say! You will defend her—of course you will. I would not have it otherwise. It does you credit; but, considering my peculiar position, you ought not to have allowed me to remain in the dark. You may have been ill, worried—what not—but, surely, surely, you could have spared me a hint!"

"A hint about what? Don't speak riddles!" said Miss Stocker, with asperity.

"She is gone!" Mr. Camelford whispered gloomily.

"She? Who? Vi? Bolted with Cyril?"

"Levity! levity! This thing is too terrible for that! Lucky I had gone no further! Lucky, indeed, I had not irretrievably committed myself. Lucky I had

said so little to Cyril! Now, of course, it is all over! There can be nothing between the two families now!"

"Lucky I stopped you getting into a bigger mess than you are in already, you should say," retorted Aunt Nan. "Lucky Cyril does not know what a fool Conny has made of you! Lucky I sent Mr. Pinnock before you had made yourself the laughing-stock of the place."

"I don't quite follow you!" said he complacently. "Mr. Pinnock found me at Meurice's. He delivered your note; but he knew nothing, or pretended to know nothing, about the Champfleury business. At one time he is boasting about certain letters, and all that sort of thing. Then he knows nothing! He blows hot and cold! The object of my visit to-day is to find out really how the case stands. For the sake of Richard Falshawe I will do what I can."

“Soon told ! Lady Chomleigh has made a fool of you.”

“Ah ! you are prejudiced against her ! Of course she takes an interest in Champfleury. What more natural ? No wonder she is excited at Mrs. Falshawe’s disappearance !”

“What does she know about it ?” Miss Stocker asked sharply.

“I have told her. I wrote immediately. I could do no less.”

This was a blow ! She dared not show it either ; but she felt perfectly certain that if he *had* written Lady Conny would be there as fast as her horses could bring her. She could see her sweet cousin sitting opposite her where then sat Mr. Camelford, playing the candid friend with a gratified smile of triumph, nodding her curls, and maddening her with playful sympathy. She would come fast enough if it was only to have the pleasure of saying “I told you so !”

"It is a pity, Miss Nancy," Mr. Camelford resumed, leaning back in his chair and taking courage from her silence, "that there was not more frankness from the first. I can understand Mrs. Falshawe's unwillingness to make me her confidant, but I can't quite understand *your* silence. Why, I should like to know, was I not told of young Torrance and Kate? Who on earth could have guessed that? It was a mistake keeping me in the dark, and a little deceptive. Among friends there should ever be a clear record."

"Upon my word you are a nice man to talk about a clear record, Mr. Camelford. I wonder what you will have to say to Mrs. Falshawe when she comes back to-morrow?"

"Coming back?"

"Of course coming back; marriage settlements don't keep people in London for ever,

do they? Clean record! What about Mr. Pinnock and Paris, eh?"

A wild shot this, but it told. Mr. Camelford did not want it bruited about that he had been seen in Paris with Mr. Pinnock. He did not want it known that they had buried the hatchet for a time there, and enjoyed themselves like true Britons at a dinner at the *Trois Frères*. He particularly desired that this Paris episode should be buried in oblivion. He did not relish Miss Nancy's reference to this. In fact so disturbed was he by the turn she had given to their conversation that he thought it high time to bring it to an end.

"I shall say no more," he said, taking up his hat hastily; "it appears I have been misunderstood! I cannot forget my old friendship for Falshawe, and I pity poor Kate."

"What do you pity me for?" asked

Kate, who at that very moment entered the room with Harry.

Now when a determined young lady asks an embarrassing question and stands between you and the door with her eyes fixed on yours waiting for an answer, it requires all your self-possession to get out of the hobble with anything like dignity.

Mr. Camelford hummed and hawed, then cleared his throat and began something about "the auspicious occasion" when she cut him short by repeating, "What do you pity me for, Mr. Camelford?"

"He pities you," said the cheerful Harry, coming to his rescue, "for throwing yourself away on a worthless fellow like me!" and Mr. Camelford then made his escape with the awkward remark that he had heard Crillick say "*He should not wonder if they did not see a Torrance back at Champfleury.*"

It was the last drop in the bucket of poor Kate's patience! "What did he mean by that? What did he mean by pitying me?" she asked angrily.

"No one heeds old Camelford," said Aunt Nancy.

"Why are the tradespeople talking about Champfleury? I'm not going to stop here to be pitied! Why on earth does the mother not write?"

"Janey is with her," said Harry, assuringly. "No harm could have come to them without our knowing it."

"Then it is something worse! Don't interrupt me, Nan. *There is some disgrace belonging to us!* This is what has troubled my mother so long—this is what is keeping her away."

"I don't quite see that, Kate," said he, rather alarmed at her manner; "but, supposing there was, what then?"

"Then," said she, with great sadness, "it must be all over between us."

"There are two to be consulted on that point," said he imperturbably.

"I won't stay here to be pitied, Harry, and I won't bring disgrace to any one!"

"I love you too well to let you off on any plea whatever," laughed Harry. "But, my dear, why talk about disgrace?"

"Ask Aunt Nan! Ask Mr. Camelford! Ask Lady Chomleigh! Ask the tradespeople! It is common talk."

"A family matter, Kate; a family matter," put in Miss Nancy, sharply.

"You told me it was about my father. Now you say it is a family matter—a family disgrace! Harry shall have none of it."

"The disgrace need not belong to you," Aunt Nan observed, quietly.

"To whom could it belong, if not to me and mine?"

“To me.”

“To you?”

The poor lady was driven into a corner by Kate's sudden attitude, and desperate straits require desperate actions. She had never expected matters to reach that pitch; but in for a penny in for a pound! She had her work to do, and do it she would come what may. So smoothing herself down and putting on a grave face she began—

“Listen! both of you,” she said. “You know, Harry, your grandmother, old Madam Torrance, made two wills, one in favour of your father and one in favour of Kate's. She kept them by her just for the sake of frightening your father, all the time intending to leave the estate to him. Well, I knew this, and when the time came for signing I burnt the right one and made her sign the wrong one. That is the whole story, my dears. Now, what do you think of me?”

There was a strange pause and Miss Nancy began to feel uncomfortable. She saw the two exchange rapid glances, and did not like it.

“ Well, what d’ye think of me ? ” she repeated sharply.

For answer she got a kiss, first on one cheek, then on the other.

“ What tomfoolery is this ? ” she cried, angrily.

“ Dear little mother ! ” said Kate, kneeling down by her, “ and you would really take this upon yourself for my sake ! You see, Harry, it is worse than we thought. We must face it, though, and we must say good-bye, dear. Good-bye, for a time, till this is cleared up.”

She was very resolute, but so was he.

“ Saying good-bye won’t get rid of me, Kate,” he sang out, “ no, not even for a time ; you can invent any number of hard lines, and you can paint ’em as black as you

like, my dear, but they shan't part us. We read of this sort of inhuman virtue in books, but the people that would carry it into everyday life cannot have loved. That is all I can say. Now it so happens I love you and you are mine."

And hereupon he takes her in his arms and kisses her before Miss Nancy's very eyes.

"Do you think, Harry," she said, gently, "that I could live here to be pointed at as the girl who brought a slur on your name? You know I couldn't. I will do what is right. Till this is cleared up we must not meet."

"Cleared or not cleared you are mine, Kate," said he, still holding her in his strong arms. "Wasn't I sent here for the express purpose of steering you through this bit of rough water, and wasn't our love sent to swamp all trouble, and make our lives more perfect and beautiful? There, Miss Fal-

shawe," he added, gaily, holding her at arms' length, "you can lay that beautiful and comforting sentiment to your heart, because it is worth ten thousand of yours. What say you, Aunt Nan?"

Aunt Nan could say nothing, she had been tried beyond her strength, she had made a mess of it, too. She had played her trump-card and lost. She had fibbed and no one believed her. Now she was helpless—just a melancholy pivot round which all the hubbub was revolving without her being able to control it. She would not give in though. By sheer pluck she pulled herself together when they came to her side, took the wine Harry brought her with a light joke, and when he left, buoyant and confident to the last, she told Kate that if they did not hear from her mother the next day she would go up to London with her.

CHAPTER VII.

LADY CHOMLEIGH REVISITS FLOWTON.

THE very next day the long-looked-for news arrived. It came in the shape of a telegram from Mrs. Falshawe to Kate, and—as fate would have it—was (all unknown to her ladyship) actually conveyed to its destination in Lady Chomleigh's own carriage.

Flowton never would countenance a telegraph-office. Once, and once only, it had been proposed by Mr. Pinnock. Backed up

by a few of the Radical members of the community he had convened a meeting to discuss the project, but he and his friends had there been so utterly pulverized by Mr. Camelford's crushing speech that the daring innovation was strangled at its birth.

"You will not only disfigure your beautiful hill with gibbet-poles," said he on that memorable occasion, "but you will subvert the good old constitutional lines of your business and bring yourselves in dangerous competition with Winford."

This settled the matter. Crillick and Co. took alarm, and henceforth all telegrams for the happy village had to be conveyed by a special messenger from Winford.

A long tiresome walk on a muggy day, and the boy in charge of Kate's telegram being overtaken by Lady Chomleigh's post-chaise forthwith availed himself of a comfortable seat on the back springs, where he whistled

and dreamed away the time till the last hill was reached; here he jumped down to take the short cut across the churchyard, and so it happened that the message was delivered only a few moments before her ladyship's carriage pulled up at Miss Nancy's front gate.

So astounded was Jessie at the sight of the pink envelope that she at once rushed into the parlour with it, leaving the front door wide open.

Miss Nancy had laid aside her crochet and Kate had just opened the envelope when in sailed Lady Conny, all colours flying, tripped across the room in her high-heeled boots, giggled out her delight at seeing Nancy, then coolly honoured Kate with a prolonged stare through her gold *pince-nez*.

"Miss Falshawe," said Aunt Nan. "Kate, this is Lady Chomleigh."

Kate returned the stare with interest. She rose slowly from her seat as Aunt Nan spoke, made a formal curtsy, and, ignoring the hand hesitatingly stretched out, swept out of the room with her mother's open telegram in her hand.

A lively little passage, all over in a couple of minutes, but while it lasted would have made a charming sketch. Her ladyship, very grand and gay in Parisian finery, a hat and feather on her head fit for a girl of eighteen, with the thinnest of gauze scarves over her shoulders so as not to hide Madame Maurice's bewitching body, and Kate in her high brown-holland frock, her towselfy head erect, brushing past her, tall and defiant, out of the room.

"Country manners!" said Lady Conny, when the door closed.

"Is staring one out of countenance con-

sidered *en règle*, then?" said Miss Nancy.

"Is this the latest from Paris?"

"My dear Nan!" cried her ladyship, "you know how wretchedly short-sighted I am! Of course I was dying to see the girl, especially now she is in everybody's mouth. She does not seem to know what is due to her elders."

"You must thank Madame Maurice for that then!" replied Miss Nancy, with a sly look at the costume.

"Ah, Nancy! Maurice is a treasure. Worth is nowhere. Why, I am half the size I was, and there is not a pinch about me. Look at the shoulders, dear. Look at the fall," and hereupon she threw off the flimsy scarf and strutted about before Miss Nancy, exhibiting the various points of her dress with immense satisfaction and vivacity.

"You must have been in a mighty hurry

to show me your finery, Conny. What made you come in this sudden fashion ? ”

“ Curiosity, my dear. Curiosity, *pur et simple*. You see I am frank. The most astounding rumours reached me and I popped off at once. No need of ceremony between you and me. I found your front door open, and another of your buttonless boys going away, so walked in, and here I am,” and with this she flaunted down the room again in grand style.

“ You’ll thrive on rumours here, Conny,” Miss Nan observed. “ What have you heard ? ”

“ I have heard that Cyril Camelford is going off to Japan to find the fellow to a willow-pattern plate with a chrysanthemum on it. Whether this is true or not I don’t know, but there seems to be no doubt about your friend up at Champfleury.”

“ What of her ? ”

“ Bolted altogether by all accounts ! ”

“ She has gone to London on business. I don’t know whether you call that bolting.”

“ Business that won’t let her come back again. He, he ! I understand.”

“ I wish you could understand how to keep that silly tongue of yours quiet ! ” said Miss Nancy hotly. “ I tell you what it is : you and Mr. Camelford will get into trouble with your blabbing. A nice dance you led that old windbag ! ”

“ Don’t run down my fat Lothario. Didn’t I tell you you had a treasure ? So anxious about Champfleury, too ! Quite a craze ! Fancy his being energetic enough to run off to Paris and back ! The activity of some stout men, Nancy, is quite too horrible ! ”

“ You ought to be ashamed of the whole affair. But now you are here for goodness’

sake keep your tongue quiet! Lawyer Pinnock is on the watch."

"The Queasy-Queery man? My dear, I'm dumb. Don't frighten me out of my skin! Why are you for ever nagging about these wretched Falshawes? I came to see Charley not to squabble about them. I never was so tired in my life."

"Take a rest then while your room is got ready."

"I will, dear. The place is like a vapour-bath. Send up to Charley and tell him to come down in an hour."

When her ladyship was comfortably curled up on the sofa Miss Nancy went off to look for Kate, and found her already dressed to go home. She gave Aunt Nan the telegram without a word. Very short and unsatisfactory it was—" *Just arrived. Shall be glad if you and Nancy could join me here.*"

"Sent from Brown's Hotel, you see," said

Kate. "I shall go up to-morrow. You won't be able to go with me now."

"Make it the day after to-morrow and I'll go with you come what may. Wire this to your mother."

"Oh, Nan! I hate having to go back to Champfleury."

"Go to the Burgoynes then. That's your place. Take the carriage on there. I'll get rid of Conny, somehow, to-morrow. Go to the Burgoynes at once."

Kate fell in with this wise advice. She dreaded her home. Home! Why she did not know whether it was her home or not. She could not face the old servants till she did know. She was very miserable, she was humbled, but Miss Nancy chirruped round her till the carriage came.

"It is all right, my girl!" she cried, when she said good-bye; "the darkest hour is just before daybreak, and we shall

be as happy as birds, in a couple of days. I'll get rid of Conny somehow, never fear! And we will go up together and settle the whole business!"

Lady Conny was not to be so easily got rid of though. Miss Nancy counted on the bare announcement of the engagement sending her flying—indignantly shaking the Flowton dust off her high-heeled boots at once and for ever. But no one in this world could tell what attitude Lady Constance Chomleigh would take!

Her son presented himself punctually at the appointed time, quite prepared to make a clean breast of it. He strode in jauntily enough, because Mr. Camelford had confidentially informed him that from what had passed at Kingstoke, and from the kind way in which his mother had spoken about them, he was sure it would be plain sailing.

Indeed, so certain was Mr. Camelford

about her ladyship being prepared for the announcement, that (out of consideration for her long journey) he himself came down to Miss Stocker's with his daughter.

Instead of Lady Chomleigh breaking the ice for her son though, she plunged at once into her late travelling experiences, and rattled on at such a rate about the beauties of the Pyrenees that the poor fellow could not get in a word edgeways!

“ You must positively take me to Pau, Charley ! ” she said enthusiastically. “ Suit you to a *t* ! Club, pack of hounds, everything you can possibly want ! Heaps of people you know, and the *cuisine* at the Hotel de France would satisfy dear Miss Nancy herself. Then you can go on through the Val d’Osseau, quite a picture-book, right up the mountains to Eauxbonnes, and there you can hunt lizzards or izzards, I forget which, and flirt with any nationality

you please. Your lady-love is pretty sure to have a cough, but that makes it all the more interesting."

"Ah, mother dear!" said he, with a big sigh, "my flirting-days are over!"

"So much the better, dear, if you allude to the last young lady you honoured with your attentions."

"That was a joke, mother! I must tell you about that ——"

"Spare me the old story, Charley. I forget how many this makes, for I suppose there *is* another on the cards? Eh?"

"You know all about it, mum dear. Mr. Camelford told me what you said about her! Rosie is an angel, the more you know her the more you'll love her! ——"

"Rosie!" exclaimed her ladyship. "You are losing your wits, Charley! Who do you mean by Rosie?"

"Rosie Camelford, mum. Why?"

“Harry Torrance’s *fiancée*!! What an atrocious little flirt! Charley! Charley! you’ll get into dreadful trouble. Your friend Henry, too. ‘Upon my word, this is really too ——’”

“Harry has nothing to do with her!” he cried, testily. “She is mine! She is ——”

“Never mind what she is, but just tell me how far you have gone? You’ve not asked her to be your wife?”

“I have!”

“Then you have done an astounding act of folly! Up to this time you have avoided entanglements! Now this Camelford girl ——”

“Mother!!” he cried, with a dangerous glitter in his eye, “don’t speak of Rosie like that! She is good and simple!”

“Good and simple! Oh my poor boy!”

“Yes! Good and simple,” he shouted almost loud enough to reach the ears of the

good and simple maiden herself, "and please remember when I bring her to you presently that she will be my wife and your daughter!"

"Don't be violent!" she said, waving her pocket-handkerchief feebly; "please tell Aunt Nan to come to me. For heaven's sake, Nan!" she cried, when the little lady appeared, "tell me about this awful business! Why, the girl is silly!"

"Simple, not silly," said Aunt Nan, shortly.

"Simple or silly, it is a catastrophe! D'ye mean to say you saw all this going on and winked at it?—saw it growing and growing, and never so much as gave me a hint? I call it wicked—positively wicked! You are one of us, Nan," she added, reproachfully.

"I have more Chomleigh blood in my veins than you have, Conny; and I think Charley an uncommonly lucky fellow to have

won such a good, honest girl as Rosie ! Take them both back to Kingstoke to-morrow and make the best of it.”

“ Let me think about it. I’m dazed ! ”

Miss Nancy knew she would not quarrel with her bread and butter. She knew, too, that her lively cousin possessed a temper so mercurial that in one moment she was from zenith to nadir—the playful jump being generally made with some occult motive.

So, when she presently looked up with a sweet smile and declared she would see Rosie, the little lady began to look out for squalls.

Nothing could have been sweeter or in better taste than her ladyship’s reception of Rosie. She drew the girl to her side on the sofa, kissed her with fervour, declared she was prettier than ever, praised her dress, patted her cheek, and, in short, was so charmingly maternal that she won all hearts. Mr. Camelford was radiant; and presently,

when the blushing Rosie was led away to inspect the Pyrenean photographs, he took the vacant seat and said, *sotto-voce*—

“Your ladyship will scarcely be surprised at this after our conversation at Kingstoke?”

“Of course not,” she replied, unflinchingly; “but how could you have gone to Paris at that critical time?”

“Well—I was anxious to get that other affair settled—and it is settled. My interest in it has lapsed entirely—entirely!”

“And this accounts for the chrysanthemum plate, eh? He! he!”

“No, I assure you he was not entangled—not in the least. His going to Japan has nothing to do with it—nothing!”

“Upon my word, the heiress seems to be going a-begging!”

“You haven’t heard then?” he said, looking furtively round with a sudden change of countenance; “you haven’t heard that——”

and here he whispered the astounding news in her ear with such electrical effect that she fairly bounced out of her chair with a loud "What !"

So loud was it that Rosie, suddenly roused from a *tête-à-tête* with her lover, jumped up guiltily and ran towards her.

"Your father has been telling me about his trip to Paris, dear," she laughed, recovering herself cleverly. "What does your mother think about it?"

"I am afraid we must run away now, Rosie," her father interposed hastily; "and if you could persuade Lady Chomleigh to spare us a couple of days I am sure your mother would be delighted."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure!" she replied, with a suave look at Miss Nancy.

Miss Nancy saw through it all in a moment. Who could tell what trouble she

might not brew if once she got inside The Laurels.

By hook or by crook she must be got rid of before they went to London, and she puzzled her brains how to set about it without rousing her suspicions.

During the evening, however (Lord Chomleigh and Rosie dined with them and kept their tongues quiet about Champfleury), she hit upon a plan which took so strong a hold upon her that in the morning she sent for Harry.

Lady Chomleigh never appeared until twelve o'clock, so the two conspirators had ample time to arrange their plans; and the shamefully underhand and puerile way in which they at last effected their purpose and plausibly bowed her ladyship out of the village will be seen presently. She came down dangerously amiable and lively.

"I shouldn't wonder if I don't spend a

week at least at The Laurels," she said, lolling back in her chair and putting her feet on the very highest stool she could find, "unless, indeed, they drive me crazy. Perhaps Mrs. Camelford may tell me a little of what has been going on, but lavender-silk women are always sly. I wonder what the tradespeople say about it. Some of them may remember old madam."

"Is this really true about your *protégé* and young Torrance?"

"True enough!"

"He, he! You've hoodwinked me nicely! My dear Nan, I'm not over particular, but upon my word there is something so revoltingly horrible in the idea of my poor martyred Harry's son marrying Richard Falshawe's daughter that my blood curdles! I wonder if the young fellow knows about it?"

"About what?"

"About the scandal. You have no right

to hoodwink *him*. He shan't be inveigled into this match without my making an effort to save him ! It is a duty to speak."

"You'll get into trouble, Conny, if you don't put a padlock on your parrot-lips. It is time you got over that spiteful jealousy!"

"My darling Pepperpot, don't eat me ! Not a bit of use to lose one's temper. What puzzles me is, how your high-minded young lady could accept a man with this story clinging to her ! So much for paragons ! Before you stick an idol on a pedestal, Nan, you should see it is strong enough to bear a tumble !"

"You had better tell Harry you jilted his father," Miss Nancy remarked.

"The dear boy would not think any the worse of me for having loved his father," she replied pathetically ; "in fact, Nan, it is this very circumstance that ——"

At this juncture, however, the door was

thrown suddenly open and in burst Josephine.

“Ah, miladi, ah, Miss Nancy!” she cried, with scared looks, “pauvre Jessie!” and without more ado she plumped herself into the nearest chair and commenced rocking herself to and fro in abject fright.

“What’s the matter with Jessie?” Miss Nancy asked innocently, not daring to take her eyes off her work.

“Mattair?” She shuddered. “Rougeole! —meezle!! My sister had the black meezle. Jessie is like her.”

“Have you gone stark staring mad, Josephine?” Lady Chomleigh asked, recovering herself with an effort; “what do you mean by dashing in here with this hideous story?”

“The doctor has seen her, miladi, Dr. Torrance. He says she is very bad. I have seen her, too! Ah, her face! Oh, horror!”

“Seen her!” shrieked her mistress, jumping up, “seen her! Been to the girl’s bedside, then come to me! You *must* be mad. For heaven’s sake, Nancy, leave off that everlasting stitch, stitch, stitch, and go and see about it. Go away, Josephine. Keep as far from me as you can, till I hear the truth about it.”

“Don’t alarm yourself, Conny,” said Miss Nancy, “I’ll see to it.”

“Go at once, please, and I will go to my room. You know what a fool I am in these matters.”

Jessie had certainly been made very hideous, and mainly by the aid of her ladyship’s own rouge-pot. Miss Nancy shook her finger at her and went on to Lady Conny’s room, where she found her ladyship had bolted herself in, so as to avoid any contact with the outside world. “Looks very bad does she?” she said, through the keyhole.

“Measles ! and in this pokey, little hole, too ! horrible ! I shall go at once, Nancy ! At once !! Tell Josephine to order a carriage from the inn, and to get some camphor. I shall pack my own things. Really you have a deal to answer for ! Never was such a *bouleversement* ! Raining, too ! Good-bye ! Please go away. I won’t shake hands. I am frightened out of my wits !”

In less than half-an-hour the little White Hart fly drove up. Her boxes were packed on the top, and her ladyship having taken her seat pulled up the windows to keep out the pestilential air. The unfortunate Josephine, with a camphor-bag pinned on the front of her dress, was consigned to the box, where, cowering under an umbrella, she jabbered away to the driver till the carriage disappeared from Miss Nancy’s sight.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. FALSHAWE'S STORY.

WHEN Miss Nancy Stocker looked out of her window next morning it seemed as if her spectacles had been suddenly fitted with rose-coloured glasses. The sun had come out, timidly, it is true, as if ashamed of his short absence from Flowton, but there he was again, shining steadily on her garden-plot, touching up the tall hollyhocks and dahlias, and filling all the corners and crannies with warmth and colour.

The rosebush under her window sent in a puff of sweet odour, a row of chattering swallows were arranging their trip abroad on the garden-rail, and the world looked so happy that the little lady accepted it as a happy augury ; at all events, there would be an end to any further dodging and lying, and this of itself was inspiring.

She hoped to slip away without seeing any one, but so alarming had been Josephine's account of the outbreak of the epidemic that the bell was kept on the jingle all the morning by anxious inquirers. The Rector came with a long face, and went away with a puzzled one. On his heels came the old doctor, who would be satisfied with nothing less than a personal examination of the supposed patient, and, finding Jessie without spot or speck, declared indignantly that it was Flowton all over to set about such reports, and that the Philistines would be

burning fires and tolling the bell one of these fine mornings because the Rector's nose was a little redder than usual. Then he daundered on about Tom in Ceylon, and was actually going to read his last letter out to her when the bell jingled again, and to her disgust in came Mr. Camelford and Cyril.

They could scarcely believe their eyes when the spruce Jessie herself, prim and smiling as ever, ushered them in.

"All the Philter," said Cyril, after her explanations. "Didn't I tell you that the Torrance Port would play the very deuce here?"

"You had better not say that before the Rector," the doctor remarked slyly, as he took his leave.

"But it has, Miss Stocker," he pursued; "your Sweet Auburn is demoralized, and

your Crillick is making a fortune out of these odorous talismans."

"What sent her ladyship off in this summary fashion?" Mr. Camelford asked, testily.

"Easily frightened," replied she, laconically.

"You may well say that. Why she actually pulled up at Crillick's and got her trunks sponged with Condyl. She telegraphed to her own doctor, and drove down the hill at a breakneck pace."

"All the Philter, sir. She felt the Aura upon her and fled. You'll be a second Caligula by the time I get back."

"You'll be hearing from her soon, Mr. Camelford," said Miss Nancy, jumping up, after an impatient glance at the clock; "but I must say good-bye now, and a *bon voyage* to Cyril. I'm busy this morning."

They were scarcely out of sight when

Kate drove up and took her and Jessie on to Winford. Even the few minutes' delay here was irksome, and Miss Nancy drew a breath of relief when the train at last steamed out of the station. Kate and she were as silent as two mutes. They tacitly tabooed the subject that was uppermost in their minds, and made no sham of talking on any other. So the elder kept her fingers at her crochet, and the younger her eyes on her book, until they reached Euston. Here Harry the cheerful met them, looked after their luggage, escorted them to Dover Street, and there left them, promising to come on the morrow.

Mrs. Falshawe was expecting them; and as she stepped across the room to meet them—calm and dignified as ever—Miss Nancy could but wonder, as she had often wondered before, how any of the petty weaknesses of humanity could possibly

belong to so majestic a presence. She kept Kate some time in her arms, her eyes filled with tears, but there was no scene, no fuss. They dined together, and after that, while Kate discreetly kept her room, Miss Nancy had the whole story. A weaker or more foolish revelation never was made.

Madam Torrance always insisted on her companion taking the healthful change of a holiday once a year. She was liberal in franking her for her journey home, and liked to welcome her back, browned and invigorated by the keen Aberdeen air, nor was she altogether indifferent to the grouse, salmon, and Scotch cakes for which Cruvie was so justly celebrated.

One fine autumn, though, Marian had something more than her ordinary holiday. She was privately married to Dick Falshawe at Cruvie by her brother-in-law, and spent her honeymoon among the Cairngorm hills.

So cleverly was it managed that no one knew a word about it. Dick came and went as usual, but so wary were they that madam never dreamed there was anything between the two but a very natural flirtation, which amused her vastly.

Next year, when madam went up to London to have her eyes operated on, she packed her off north again to recruit her failing strength by a long holiday, and then it was that Kate was born; the child, on Marian's return, being left in charge of old Janey, a tried and faithful servant of the Rowans.

Once more at Champfleury, Mr. Richard Falshawe soon developed a keen anxiety about the future. He knew about the wills, knew how cunningly they had been snipped, and suggested to Marian how easy it would be to alter them. Then began their first squabble. Husband importunate, wife firm,

and if madam had not been half blind she must have seen enough to have roused her suspicions.

Marian held out strongly against her husband's entreaties. She would not put the two wills into his hands, but when he threatened to leave her for good the new wife's heart was touched and she yielded. She took the wills from under madam's pillow while she slept, Dick manipulated them with a pair of scissors, and she replaced them without her being one bit the wiser. Then fear got hold upon her as it does upon all evil-doers. She was for throwing herself at madam's feet and confessing everything.

"If you do," says Dick, "I shall take the child to America, and you won't see us again."

At madam's death, however, even he felt nervous. The situation was alarming. The clandestine marriage taken in conjunction

with his unexpected inheritance would attract unwelcome attention. He took earnest conference with his wife, and the outcome of it was they were re-married in London, and the notices appeared in the papers just before they started for their long sojourn in Paris.

Here, when they were comfortably settled, old Janey joined them with the child, and after three or four years' stay abroad they returned to Champfleury with apparently nothing in this world to trouble them.

No sooner, however, was Marian inside Champfleury—mistress now where formerly she had been dependent—than up popped the old fear again, and this unwelcome visitor never left her day or night.

It went with her in her walks, sat down by her side, and reminded her in a hundred different ways of the past. People thought her changed for the worse, riches had spoilt

her, they said. Little did they think that this stately and distant courtesy was solely and simply an endeavour to hide the unconquerable dread that was taking tighter hold of her every day. One's enemies possess a supernatural power in finding out when a screw is loose with us. They know it long before we do, and it is generally some overt act of theirs that first makes us acquainted with it.

The outside world soon got hold of the constraint that hung about Champfleury. Old Paul suddenly showed he was wide-awake in his wheeled chair, and Lady Chomleigh ostentatiously clattered her post-horses through Flowton, and dropped playful hints about the *menage* at Champfleury.

It was mainly to stifle this growing gossip that Dick jumped at Henry Torrance's offer to pay them a visit. Not a wise step as the sequel showed; but, shady as Dick was in all

his dealings, he never would have descended to quite such a low expedient of getting rid of his visitor if he had not been driven to extremities. His wife was half beside herself while Torrance was with them. Every moment he feared she might lose her head and plump out everything. So the plan was concocted. Henry Torrance was sacrificed, and the affair ended in Lady Chomleigh's pet scandal.

All through this confession Kate had been uppermost in Miss Nancy's mind, and now that she found they could look the world in the face she felt half inclined to jump up and hug the weak mother for having so much relieved her. She checked any sentiment, however, and said—

“You have been a chicken-hearted woman, Marian, and you have been rightly punished.”

“My real punishment began when my

husband died," Mrs. Falshawe resumed. "As Kate grew up Champfleury became intolerable. Something separated us. It grew with her growth. How could I take her to my heart with this wretched story clinging to me? It stood between us. You, dear Nan, have been more of a mother to her than I. Everything shaped itself into a reproof and a punishment!"

"Why didn't you write?" Miss Nancy asked practically; "what made you keep us in this horrible suspense, and set all the Flowton tongues wagging?"

"I started intending to go straight on to Cruvie with Janey. Jenny and her husband knew all about it, and we had to get the certificates. When I got here, though, I found they had gone away for a ten days' visit, so I thought it best to keep quiet in lodgings. If I had written, Kate might have taken alarm and come up."

"Have you seen Paul Torrance?"

"Yes, and got through it better than I deserve. I was with him yesterday afternoon, and we have to go there to-morrow. I told him everything I have told you. He may be mad, Nancy, but he is a gentleman. When he saw the papers he almost made it appear that I was the injured person and not he."

"What about Champfleury?"

"I offered to give it up. I said Kate would wish it. He smiled, and said he must consult Harry. He is the most extraordinary man I ever met. He knows everything."

"And now you will have to tell Kate."

This was the hardest part of Mrs. Falshawe's ordeal. She went through it though. Perhaps she did not tell her quite so much as she had told Aunt Nan. She certainly never said one word against Kate's father. Whether the girl put two and two

together, and thought out something for herself, I don't know. What she *did* hear she heard without flinching, and came back to Miss Nancy with a new light in her face, and a determined, set look about her mouth that the little lady did not half like.

“I have heard all about it,” she said, with a smile that Miss Stocker instinctively resented. “We shall know what to do now.”

“Harry will tell you what to do, miss,” Aunt Nan replied, sharply.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAMPFLEURY CHANGES HANDS.

IF Miss Stocker did not quite like Kate's demeanour over night she liked it far less in the morning. The young lady joined them at breakfast smiling and cheerful, agreed with what was proposed for the day, but said never a word about Champfleury, and never a word about Harry and their intended visit to Dean House. Aunt Nan

saw through all this. Smiles did not deceive her; she knew it was a weakness of her sex to hide a deep motive by an assumption of gaiety, and an exasperating acquiescence in everything. The more she looked at the girl the more convinced was she that she was nursing the same sentimental nonsense she had uttered while Harry held her in his arms in her little parlour at Flowton.

She wouldn't have this! Harry would be there directly, and she was not going to have a scene just as things were righting themselves satisfactorily. So by some device she got the girl up to her room for a minute or two, and gave her a bit of her mind.

"Look here, Kate!" said she, "don't go coddling any romantic trash in your head! Oh, I know what you are thinking about! Don't try to deceive me! Remember what Harry told you in my room."

"You forget, Nan," she replied gently,

“that we have to deal with Paul Torrance to-day. You forget that we have to go on our knees and confess to having done this great wrong. Goodness knows that will be humiliating enough! It would be something worse in his eyes if I did not release Harry.”

There was a gulp or two as she said the last words, but Aunt Nan went on angrily—

“I’m disappointed with you, Kate! I thought you were above this superfine drivel!”

“It is not only the money, Nan,” she said with a flush.

“Stuff and nonsense! love heals everything, and here you are putting your stiff-necked pride before it. Listen, Kate! you ought to be happy, you are nearer your mother now than you ever have been, there is not a cloud between you, you have an

honest man's love. Pocket your pride for his sake."

"For his sake I must not—well, won't if you like. I won't throw away the last rag of honest pride we've got left!"

"It's a Brummagem sort of pride that stands before natural feelings!"

"I have thought it out, Nan!"

"Run away and think it over again before Harry comes; and remember, my girl, it is these big troubles and trials, properly faced and borne, that make true women of us."

Kate had thought it out over-night according to her own lights, and a miserable tussle it had been. To let old Paul think that the wrong was to be patched up by her giving herself to Harry, and tacking disgrace on to him, had something so repugnant in it that she flushed at the bare thought. She had schooled herself into the sacrifice of giving Harry up, and now it was called

a Brummagem pride. She thought it over again, and did not gain much by the operation ; besides, after a terrible struggle, having arrived at what she considered a good and proper conclusion (which simply meant a sacrifice of all that was most prized by her), she did not like to undergo the temptation of reasoning herself out of it—she wanted action, not thought, which could only end in tears, lamentations, and general weakness.

She wanted to get it all over and go away somewhere and hide herself and her troubles from the world. The stuffy hotel was intolerable, and the very waiters seemed to know their disgrace.

She was looking out on to the dingy street when Harry's carriage drove up.

Here was something tangible to be faced at last ; and she jumped up, thankful that her unsatisfactory cogitation was over. She tidied herself quickly, her feminine instinct

prompting her to put a little more care into her toilette ; but with every little touch she was strengthening her resolution to tell him firmly and quietly her determination before they started.

As she went down she had to check a sob at the sound of his cheery laugh.

She met him bravely ; but as to speaking she might as well have tried to whisper to a gale of wind.

“ We will have it all out at Dean House,” he cried, with a laugh at her long face. And, to Miss Nancy’s secret exultation, they were presently all whirled away in the carriage without Kate having had the chance of saying a word. The young man was in that particular state of exultation which requires continual chatter as a safety-valve. He rattled on during that drive till the very horses caught his mood, and took them through the streets and round the corners at

a pace that reminded Miss Nancy of her old Continental gallops. They pulled up at Dean House with a jerk that sent her high bonnet off her head, and the gate flew open as if by magic.

Before they could get out of the carriage old Paul had whirled up his chair and escorted them into the house in a sort of stage triumph.

This was very different to what Kate had expected. She had made up her mind for a highly unpleasant interview between Mr. Paul Torrance and themselves—an ordeal which would require all her pluck and forbearance. So, when, in place of this, the old gentleman said presently, with great politeness, that his first business was with her alone, she was very considerably bewildered. She followed him at once, however, and the two or three words that Harry managed to whisper in her ear as she passed

sent the blood to her cheeks and gave her strength for the encounter.

“Now, my dear young lady,” the old gentleman began, when he had put her in the easiest seat and brought up his chair close beside her, “you are in the wizard’s clutches; and I daresay you’ll find him a very harmless sort of wizard after all. Unless I have been very much misinformed you are far too sensible a young lady not to know that business is business, and must be attended to however unpleasant.”

Kate knew this, she said, and, what was more, had come there for the express purpose of hearing about business.

“Your mother was here yesterday, Miss Kate, she was here for two hours, and in that two hours we travelled over more than twenty years. She told me a strange story.”

“I know the story, sir,” said Kate

quietly; "I know we have done you a great wrong."

"Don't say *we*, young lady," said the old gentleman, quickly.

"My father!" faltered Kate.

"Yes, your father did us an injury, though your mother will have it was she. However,

'It is a virtuous and Christian-like conclusion
To pray for those who have done scath to us.'

So now she talks about reparation. What say you?"

"I say, sir," said Kate, boldly, "that *it* is what we both wish and desire."

"Wait a bit! Have you counted the cost? Can you say with the bard,

'My resolution's placed. I have nothing of
the woman in me!'

"I can! Champfleury is not ours. It must be given back to you!"

“Don’t be hasty, now! It may be harder than you think. You must be very fond of it!”

“It is my home!” said Kate, simply.

“And a beautiful home too, by all accounts. I daresay you know every corner of it! Every dell and every brooklet! A grand place, I believe, with grand trees and gardens. Ah! it will be a wrench to give up such a home!”

“You must take it, sir! My mother wishes it!”

“It rests with you, Miss Kate, not with your mother.”

“I have thought about that, Mr. Torrance. I will sign anything.”

“Ah!” said he, with a smile, “it is not every business that can be completed by signing. It might be conveyed.”

“The sooner the better, sir.”

“Yes, it might, certainly, be conveyed,”

he continued, slowly, as if working 'out the problem. "It might certainly be conveyed without much difficulty, if you really wish it!"

"We shall not be happy 'till it is done!"

"Then your happiness is in your own hands! Would you like it completed *now*—at the present moment?"

"Certainly!"

"We must have a witness, Miss Kate."

"Anything you think necessary," she replied.

Hereupon he shot out of the room, and before Kate had recovered her surprise had returned with Harry.

"Here!" he cried, with a stage flourish, "here is my witness! Now! will you convey your gift to him? Remember!

'To the noble mind

Rich gifts are poor when givers are unkind.'"

Kate was caught. She jumped up and stared at them both for some seconds in

mute distress. All she could stammer out was "Ah, sir! my father! the disgrace!" but no further could she get.

Unfortunate this! seeing that it was just the time when that superfine resolve of hers could have been brought in, and that rag of honest pride fluttered in old Paul's face with full effect. But alas! not a word would come. She had been worried and flurried out of all ken. For weeks she had been looking forward to an unpleasant crisis, and this dreaded meeting, which should have been a business-like affair, had been fantastic, stagey, and unreal.

Everything seemed unreal. Everything, indeed, except Harry, who stood sturdily there with a world of love in his eyes. At the sight of him she broke down, and as she fell sobbing in his arms old Paul shot out of the room again, chuckling with delight at this dramatic ending to the scene.

Kate was a poor heroine after all. She certainly might have made a better stand, but then, she was in love—and love laughs at pride as much as he does at locksmiths, and sometimes brings it into pleasant subjection. She had tumbled from her high horse, but there was Harry to pick her up and soothe her fall. While he did this he told her a great deal—how he had had it out with his uncle and that everything was straight, and how she must have been one of the most foolish of all foolish darlings to suppose that anything in this wide world could keep them apart: how that all must have been preordained for the very best, since it had brought them together.

So grateful was all this to Kate's wounded feelings that she instinctively lingered over it. The day was still and sultry. The hum of the distant street and occasional louder rumble just outside the walls made a running

accompaniment to Harry's soothing songs for the future. Small blame to Kate, then, if she *did* dally with that pleasant time and enjoy a few restful moments after all her suspense and worry.

So fine too is the sympathy between youth and youth, that as she listened to him she began gradually to take a more sensible view of the situation and put her thoughts more in accord with his.

At last, when he boldly spoke of the "wrong" as an unmitigated blessing, she looked up quickly, and said with her old frankness: "*Whatever it was, Harry, I'll try and make amends for it.*"

To this Harry replied with a lover's promptitude, and after a little led the young lady back to the old people in quiet triumph.

The trying part of it was that the old people took it all as a matter of course—and the sumptuous lunch that followed, with

its profusion of fruit and flowers, showed unmistakably that it had been prepared for the occasion. All just a little stagey, but there was the true ring about old Paul, and as she bent down for his kiss she felt happy and content.

Who was not happy there? Mrs. Falshawe had plenty to be thankful for; and as for Aunt Nan, she felt twenty years younger! One tremendous load had been taken from her mind, for, though she had kept it to herself, she had for months been in mortal dread lest her frolicsome heart should cease beating altogether before her girl's happiness was assured.

When she thanked old Paul for his patience, he propelled his chair close to her and said, "I've lost the game, Miss Stocker! I'm beaten! I have been playing with a false piece. But, never mind!" he added, with a gallant reference to Kate, "it is

sometimes pleasant to get your check from the queen."

Within a week Flowton was in full tongue about the Champfleury wedding, for, mind you, it was not to be an half-and-half affair, but a real *bonâ fide* Flowton business from beginning to end. Every single thing, from the bride's veil to the wedding-cake, was to be purveyed by the Flowton tradesmen; and Mr. Camelford's popularity waned perceptibly because he did not take an example thereby, and get Miss Rosie's *trousseau* from Messrs. Bungey and Co. instead of allowing Lady Chomleigh to hike her off to Madame Maurice.

"But," said Mr. Camelford, "it is all very well for the Falshawes, who have certain obligations. They must trust themselves to the tender mercies of the village. But it would never do for us. We have decided

that it would be best for Rosie to get her *trousseau* in Paris and be married by special licence in Hanover Square." And he harped so much on this special licence that Miss Nancy observed sharply she believed some people supposed they had a special licence from the Almighty for existing.

He could scarcely believe his ears when he was told that Mr. Pinmock was to draw out the marriage settlements. But true it was; and by this happy thought of Miss Nancy's all the old grudge against Champfleury was cleared off, and the lawyer was more devoted to her service than ever. To this day, however, he believes that she played some hanky-panky with that will.

Before the year was out Kate was quietly married in the parish church, and no sooner were the young people back than Mrs. Falshawe sprang a mine on them by announcing her intention of leaving Champfleury. She

had determined to go and live near her sister at Cruvie. No sudden resolve this. She had thought of it before the marriage, and since that the whole thing had been settled. Nothing could move her from it. Kate was angry at first, but when she found it was really for her mother's happiness she gave in, and with the promise of a yearly visit Mrs. Falshawe went off with old Janey to end her days in her old northern home.

So it came about that the Torrances again reigned at Champfleury, and heartily welcomed they were. Among the very first to call was Lady Chomleigh, who declared unblushingly that she had taken a fancy to Kate from the very first moment she had seen her. "And though we did girn at each other like cats, my dear," she added, sweetly, "I have no doubt we shall be just as close friends as Charley and your husband are."

After this Flowton imperceptibly slid back to its normal behaviour. Mr. Camelford, in wholesome dread of any publicity being given to their excursion in Paris, patched up a truce with Mr. Pinnock. He also made matutinal demonstrations in the High Street by way of propitiating the offended tradesmen.

When Cyril came back with his chrysanthemum plate all traces of the evil working of the Philter had disappeared. He returned very grey, and lives almost entirely at The Laurels now. "Finding out what the robins say," he says. But really, completing his new poem based on the late events at Flowton. It is called "A Summer Madness," and he recites each last written stanza by the fireside with Miss Vi's hand platonically grasped in his.

Dear Miss Nancy is still light-hearted—still energetic and happy—still dictator and

comforter to those in sickness and adversity. She goes little from home now, for, though she has no more "plumpers," as she calls them, she is more feeble. When she does go out it is to Champfleury. She thinks that matrimony has softened Kate a little too much—but Mistress Kate can show a spice of the old temper occasionally, especially if her husband makes any reference to a paper-chase.

Kate would keep Aunt Nan at Champfleury altogether if she could, but Miss Nancy clings to her wee home, and still likes to give a dainty little dinner on the 24th of May and hear the Queen's health drunk with all honours.

THE END.

